'B2V' Initiative in Jammu and Kashmir – How far is it Citizen-Centric?

K Gireesan

ABSTRACT

The government of Jammu and Kashmir started the innovative programme "Back to Village" in an effort to connect with the populace at the local level and foster a sincere desire for a living wage. The programme intended to revitalise Halqa Panchayats in the State and the Decentralized Governance system as a whole. This essay examines the exercise's setting, theoretical viewpoints, distinctive characteristics, and process documentation. Additionally, it analyses the exercise's advantages, disadvantages, opportunities, and difficulties from the viewpoint of the citizen.

Key words: *Back to village - Decentralised Governance - Halqa Panchayats - Participatory Development – Citizen-centric Governance*

Background

THE GOVERNMENT OF Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) initiated an ambitious and extensive programme titled Back to Village (B2V) towards 'reaching out to the people at the grassroots level in order to create an earnest desire for decent standard of living'.[1] This was taken up as a flagship initiative by the State Government. B2V, a unique initiative to usher development and empowerment of Panchayats in Jammu and Kashmir, was launched in 2019 when the State was under President's rule.

B2V programme has been conceived to ensure that developmental initiatives are built on the feedback and cooperation of the people. Hence, they shall be more result-oriented, leading to a greater

probability of success than those which are top-down. While official machinery has to guide and assist, the primary responsibility rests with the people to improve local conditions. It was aimed at 'involving the people of the state and government officials in a joint effort to deliver the mission of equitable development, by energizing Panchayats and directing development efforts in rural areas through community participation'.[2] It emphasized the importance of ensuring people's participation, 'not merely as an agent in the execution of the development works, but as owners of the entire programme'.[3]

This paper discusses the exercise's context, unique features and process documentation. It brings out the theoretical perspectives of such development initiatives. It analyses the exercise's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges, which may help in the scalability and replicability of the exercise in different parts of the country and outside. It also brings out the specific outcomes of the initiative that may be considered to enhance its scope and sustainability.

The author conducted interviews with the key informants, like elected functionaries of *Halqa Panchayats* and community leaders. Telephonic interviews were held to seek supplementary information from the same respondents and others. This was necessary as the country had mobility restrictions due to the pandemic. Before the onset of the pandemic, focus group discussions with members of women, youth, and farmers from the area, non-participant observation of the selected areas, etc., were held in the Jammu region. Secondary data was gathered from relevant Govt. offices, *Halqa Panchayats*, reports, dailies, and other documents.

The Context

B2V programme aimed to direct the development efforts in rural areas of J&K through community participation, to create a strong desire for an improved and decent living standard, and to take necessary measures to realise them with the active involvement of citizens from the locality. Major goals of B2V were 'energising *Panchayats*; collecting feedback on the delivery of government schemes and programmes; capturing specific economic potential; and, undertaking an assessment of needs of villages'.[4] B2V has the potential to rejuvenate the decentralised governance system in the State of J&K with emphasis on revitalising *Halqa Panchayats*[5] and to provide citizen-centric governance. As part of the initiative, gathering feedback on the delivery of programmes and schemes from the primary stakeholders for whom they were intended to benefit is an important function. In addition, it includes resource mapping; assessment of needs, concerns, issues, and problems; setting priority for intervention, etc.

As a sequel to the differences in the coalition government by the People's Democratic Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Government led by Mehbooba Mufti collapsed, and the State of J&K was put under Governor's rule in June 2018. Initially, the Legislative Assembly was kept under 'suspended animation' and the State's governor gave the political parties a chance to explore the possibility of government formation by permutation and combinations. Subsequently, the legislative assembly was dissolved, and the State was placed under President's Rule as per Article 356 of Indian Constitution on 20 Nov 2018. President's rule in the State was subsequently extended with the approval of Parliament.

B2V was launched when the Governor ruled J&K with advisors' help after the Legislative Assembly's suspended animation. Though the *Halqa Panchayats* were constituted after the elections to the Local Governments, they were not very active and vibrant. The Local Governments could not take up need-based and demand-driven initiatives as they were badly affected by the inadequacy of funds at their disposal. And the bureaucracy in the State was not very much pro-active as it believed and acted more for maintaining the 'status-quo' in administration. There was a 'deficit of representative democracy' prevalent in the State, and the whole population was partly disillusioned with the political system at the state and sub-state levels. The launching of the B2V programme in J&K by the Governor needs to be analysed in this context.

Theoretical Perspectives

J&K is a strategically located and politically sensitive part of India. By virtue of sharing the International Border / Line of Control / Line of Actual Control with the neighbours like China and Pakistan, the strategic location of the area is very significant. The State of J&K was placed under the President's rule a number of times during the past. The state has witnessed several conflicts since its formation, both internal and external. Though the state has enormous potential for agriculture, floriculture, horticulture, tourism, etc., it could not generate enough revenues to bring economic stability. J&K is one of the states of the country with 'Special Category Status' where the Government of India used to make large investments for realising development and welfare, to provide security and to sustain peace. This becomes very much imperative considering the area's strategic importance, political sensitivity, ecological significance, and economic development.

Despite the arguments that whether conflict precedes development or under-development leads to conflict, the countries/ regions/ areas

affected by conflicts used to have issues of socio-economic development and political power across the world. A study linking economic development and social conflicts reported that 'social conflict and economic development are organised around three views: Higher standards of living reduce the probability of conflict; inequality nurtures conflict; and most conflicts in developing countries are ethnic in nature'.[6] This shows that increase in standard of living of the population can reduce the possibilities of conflict whereas inequality can promote the chances of conflict. It also points towards the significance of taking specific measures to improve the life and living of the population, especially in conflict-affected areas.

It is known that 'only if all segments of society, especially marginalised groups, have a chance to participate, economic development can contribute to prevent further conflict'.[7] It reinforces the importance of involving the community members in the development and highlights the strategy behind incorporating the views and ensuring participation of all sections of the society, especially the marginalised.

In a research study on conflict and development,[8] it was noted that evidence from the conflict-affected field remains sparse, scattered and largely based on case studies; and, policy interventions are rarely evaluated and monitored. It is reported that micro level and household data can go a long way towards bridging the gap between country level data and event causality during and after conflict within local communities. This highlights the importance of gathering data directly from the population, in order to take up appropriate follow-up measures for development and welfare for them.

In a cross-national study of the relationship between ethnic diversity and development,[9] the authors viewed that diversity dividends are best explored at the sub-national level, in regions, administrative areas, cities, etc. This is because when ethnic interactions occur within these units, they avoid the problems of the artificiality of borders. This shows that ethnic diversity and development can be better addressed at the lowest administrative units like local governments.

Local governments are the flag-bearers of democracy and decentralized system of governance in India. The true spirit of democracy depends on the active involvement and participation of the people in the decision-making process to address their needs, concerns, issues, and problems, in the order of priority desired by them. With the active participation of the local population in planning, implementation, and monitoring, the local governments could bring positive changes. To realise that, the Local Governments shall be

devolved with adequate funds, functions and functionaries. They could bring significant changes by using the resources available at their disposal. Linking the elected leaders of the local governments and the local population with the officials of various Government departments/ agencies will enable the analysis of the locality's issues and problems and factor them into the process of participatory planning more effectively and efficiently.

In this context, the empowerment of elected leaders, community members, officials, and other stakeholders becomes significant. According to Narayan,[10] empowerment framework includes the provision of basic services, improved local governance, improved national governance, pro-poor market development, and access by poor people to justice. Among all these, providing basic services to the population has been the most significant as it forms the basis for the remaining functions. An approach focused on generating demand from the citizens and people's organisations, is quite significant in ensuring access to basic services in a locality.

Basic services include enhancing access to all marginalised groups and effective use of basic services such as health care, education, water, sanitation facilities, housing, waste management, roads, etc. In this background, the initiative of B2V became very significant, as it visualised an attempt to take a proactive approach towards providing basic services to the village community by involving them in planning from below.

Similar Initiatives

Before discussing the details about B2V programme, a number of initiatives taken up within the country and outside with certain similar features need to be looked into. 'Operation *Barga*' was an initiative taken up in the State of West Bengal by the Left Front Government in 1978. It was a land reform movement carried out in the State for recording the names of *bargardars* (sharecroppers) while avoiding the time-consuming method of documenting through the settlement machinery. The ultimate aim of the movement was to facilitate the conversion of the state's sharecroppers into land owners, in line with the spirit of the Indian Constitution.

Prajala Vaddaku Palana, which may be considered the predecessor to the *Janmabhoomi* programme by the Telugu Desam Government in Andhra Pradesh, was launched on 2 October 1995. This was to bridge the gap between the people and the state administration. It was a two-way process in which the Government officials understood the people's problems through direct contact, and the people got an opportunity to represent their issues, problems, and grievances directly

to the officials. The programme had its thrust on people-centred participatory development.

Government of Kerala initiated the *Jana Samparka Paripadi* (Mass contact programme) in 2012 when the United Democratic Front ruled the state. It was conceived as a platform for the Chief Minister (which was later extended to other Ministers) to directly meet the people, hear their complaints and take possible and quick action. The thrust of the programme was to bridge the gap between the people and the government by removing the red-tapism, that came on the way of providing just and speedy delivery of services.

The 'Go to Village' mission was launched in the State of Manipur on 1 May 2018. It was a significant initiative made to rejig the bureaucracy and to make them serve the people more effectively and in a time-bound manner. As part of the initiative, the officials from different Government departments were instructed to be available at the designated village on a specified day to address the pending issues/grievances of the people then and there. This was a unique initiative made to take the 'Secretariat' to the villages for the larger benefit of people.

Just ahead of the polls to the legislative assembly in West Bengal, a mega outreach programme titled as *Duare Sarkar* (Government at doorsteps) was rolled out in 2020. This programme was taken to ensure the doorstep delivery of government schemes. As part of the programme, benefits of at least eleven state government-run schemes were made available to eligible people in the special camps. However, due to COVID-19 pandemic, not much progress in its implementation could be found.

Initiatives with similar features were also noted from South Korea and Nepal. During the 1970s, in the Republic of Korea, the *Saemaul Undong* (New Village Movement) was launched. It was a community-driven development programme with thrust on voluntary participation of people and active public support. The nationwide development movement was made with the slogan of diligence, cooperation, and self-help.

By comparing various initiatives mentioned before, the B2V programme could find the closest one from Nepal, where the 'Back to Village National Campaign' was launched a few decades ago. Probably, the B2V programme in J&K was greatly influenced by the national campaign in Nepal, which was in operation during 1967-1975. The campaign was carried out in the rural areas of Nepal, aiming to direct development efforts to the country's rural areas, which were predominantly limited to the urban centres. It could be viewed as a special drive for creating social awareness among the rural population

and to get their support in implementing various flagship initiatives of that country. As part of the national campaign, civil servants and students from the cities were sent to live in rural communities, participate in development work, and serve as teachers in village schools. In the backdrop of these initiatives from within the country and outside, features and operationalization of B2V in J&K shall be examined.

Unique Features of B2V

As part of the B2V initiative, the entire administrative machinery of the State Government was geared up, motivated, and encouraged to visit all the 4483 *Halqa Panchayats*.

The B2V initiative is significant owing to the following features.

(a) B2V is a unique initiative and is the first of its kind.[11]

(b) The initiative was made when the State of J&K was placed under the Governor's rule as no party/ coalition could muster a majority to form the Government. Significantly, elections to the *Halqa Panchayats* in the State were held after several years, but adequate funds were unavailable.

(c) The initiative emphasises the ownership of development by the local people, and the officials from different Government Departments are responsible for implementation with their guidance and support.

(d) It visualises a co-ordinated approach by the *Halqa Panchayat* touching all aspects of village life and not through the officials from different Government departments.

(e) It has the potential to sensitise and re-orient the senior bureaucracy (drawn from different Government Departments and Agencies) in J&K by enabling them to observe, analyse and document the field realities. Thus, the whole initiative helped the bureaucracy to present its humane face to the population, re-orient itself before the community and receive positive feedback.

(f) It could lead to early follow-up actions on priority areas/ issues that were largely ignored or not adequately attended.

(g) It can give a healing touch and soothing effect to the citizens struggling with multiple issues/ problems.

(h) It is expected to provide impetus to governance and development in J&K by providing an excellent opportunity to the citizens to make the bureaucracy accountable and transparent in the absence of an elected leadership at different 'spheres'[12] of Government.

Process Documentation of B2V

As part of the initiative, one Gazetted Officer was designated and

deployed in each *Halqa Panchayat*. The designated officer was expected to interact with the elected members (present/former), officials at the field offices of different Departments of the State Government, community leaders/ key informants, functionaries of Development Organisations/ NGOs, and all other key stakeholders to get impartial, unbiased and genuine feedback from the rural population.

The first phase of B2V initiative was made during 20-27 June 2019. As part of the programme, one senior official (Gazetted Officer from a Govt. Department/ Corporation/ Agency) from the State Government was directed to stay in a designated *Halqa Panchayat* for two days and one night. Around 5,000 officers reached out to the people in about 4,483 *Halqa Panchayats* in J&K.

Giving details about its launch, the spokesperson of the State Government mentioned that it is 'to bridge the gap between achievable and achieved goals in development, take governance to doorsteps of the rural and inaccessible areas, and generate credible and empirical feedback.'[13] The programme was expected to help streamline the government's developmental schemes and welfare initiatives to maximise its impact and outreach. Energising panchayats and directing development efforts in rural areas through community participation were also visualised through the programme.

The maiden attempt generated much interest, enthusiasm, and positive response from the public. It raised the general public's expectations about possible solutions to several long-pending issues. The senior-most officials of the State Government including the Chief Secretary; Secretary, General Administration Department; Principal Secretary, Department of Animal and Sheep Husbandry, and other senior officers of Govt. of J&K visited several far-flung areas, militancy-infested localities, and border area villages as part of the initiative.

During the field visits and overnight stays in the village, the officers interacted with the community leaders and all other sections living in the locality. Through these interactions, the officials understood the pressing needs, issues, and problems of under-development in the locality, realised the ineffectiveness/ delay/ no response for several pending demands, etc. They also tried identifying priority sectors/ areas/topics/projects that needed early interventions. In addition, the field visits made by the senior officers of the bureaucracy and informal interactions they had with the elected members of the *Halqa Panchayat* and with the community in their natural field settings, brought a positive image of the Government.

The interventions that were followed up after the field stay resulted in sustaining the hope by the community about this initiative.

It was reported that the programme 'is getting a massive response, especially from people in the militancy-infested areas.'[14] The Prime Minister of India in his periodical address to the nation through All India Radio appreciated the programme. He said it would have "ripple benefits with thrust on community mobilisation and numerous possible opportunities that may come to the community.'[15]

The second phase of Back to Village (B2V2) was organised during 25-30 November 2019. B2V2 focused on 'the follow-up of the first phase, ensuring the functionality of panchayats in terms of manpower, cent percent coverage of beneficiary-oriented schemes and doubling of income of rural people by giving impetus on the rural economy.'[16]

As part of the preparatory works for effective supervision and monitoring of the field visits, interactions, and reporting of the second phase, control rooms were set up by the Deputy Commissioners in their respective Districts. During the B2V2, the visiting officers were explicitly instructed to gather requisite details about 'languishing projects',[17] in addition to major developmental plans, schemes, and projects carried out in the area to help formulate District Plans.

To understand the process very clearly, a series of preparatory steps and actions were taken. The specific steps taken as part of the operationalisation of the initiative are listed below.[18]

Step 1 : Formation of District level co-ordination cell.

Step 2 : Formation of Sub-Divisional level co-ordination cell.

Step 3 : Preparation of the list of Liaison officers.

Step 4 : Preparation of deployment list of Gazetted Officers deputed for B2V programme.

Step 5: Preparation of the deployment list of Gazetted Officers from within the district.

Step 6 : Preparation of the deployment list of Gazetted Officers for each *Halqa Panchayat* in the District.

Step 7 : Preparation of the deployment list of facilitators in each *Halqa Panchayat*.

Step 8 : Preparation of List of Schools, *Panchayat Ghar*, etc. nominated as the venue in each *Halqa Panchayat*.

Step 9 : Preparation of B2V Handbook.

Step 10: Preparation of B2V presentation.

Step 11: Preparation of the list of activities to be carried out by various Govt. Departments at the *Halqa Panchayats*.

Step 12: Preparation of Action Plan by the relevant Govt. Dept. such as Action Plan – Agriculture, Rural Development Action plan, etc.

Drawing lessons from the previous two phases, phase III of the Back to Village programme (B2V3) was held in different parts of J&K

for ten days during 2 - 12 October 2020. Significantly, before the implementation of Phase III of the B2V programme (B2V3), the administration completed its three-week pre-B2V *Jan Abhiyan* (Public campaign). Under the pre-B2V programme, the administration focused on the '*Jan Sunvayee* (Redressal of public grievances), *Adhikar Abhiyan* (Public service delivery) and *Unat Gram Abhiyan* that gave thrust on delivery of development at the *Halqa Panchayat* level'.[19] Since the Government has given administrative power to *Panchayat* members, they were optimistic about the results of B2V3. As part of the preparatory measures, special camps were held by the Rural Development Department at Sub-division/ *Tehsil* / Block/ *Halqa* levels in the districts.

Phase I of the B2V programme (B2V1) was an introductory and interactive programme to understand people's demands and grievances. Phase II of the B2V (B2V2) focused on the devolution of powers to the *Halqa Panchayats* and tried to understand how they function and their grievances and demands. Phase III of the B2V programme (B2V3) was specially designed on the format for grievance redressal, based on the inputs gathered from the previous two phases. It was reported that 'B2V3 aims to build on the foundations of B2V1 and B2V2. And the focus of B2V3 was on implementation and execution'.[20]

The author contacted the *Sarpanches/ Panches* of number of *Halqa Panchayats* from Jammu as well as Kashmir regions in two spells, Dec 2019 – Feb 2020 and Nov-Dec 2020.[21]

Analysis of B2V

B2V initiative is in the infancy stage, but the expectations and hopes it has raised among the rural population of J&K have been quite significant. Analysis of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Challenges (SWOC) of the B2V has been made here. This analysis is expected to enable the organisers and other stakeholders to make necessary changes in the approach, contents, and operationalization strategy in the subsequent phases. It is expected to contribute to the initiative's replicability and scalability in different parts of the country and outside. This will also help the community and other stakeholders to receive optimum benefits from the programme.

Strengths:

- This initiative is quite ambitious and unique. It is the first of its kind launched in the state. Hence, the initiative's outcome has significance, as it was taken up on an experimental basis.

- The initiative has the inherent potential to orient, sensitise and enhance awareness among the bureaucracy about the field realities through participant observation, interactions, analysis, and documentation.
- Through such initiatives, bureaucracy will be able to address the issues/problems of the community with a 'humane touch'.
- It enables the bureaucracy to re-orient itself before the community and receive positive feedback from the general public through formal and informal ways.
- Enables the administration to gather regular feedback on government schemes and programme delivery.
- When organised at periodical intervals, such visits and interactions will enable genuine feedback on any programme/ scheme/ project in a longitudinal manner.

Weaknesses:

·   There was a huge turnout of people and a very high level of enthusiasm during the first phase of B2V. But with almost no change / no result of the complaints/ representations made by the leadership and community members during the first meeting, the participation rate came down drastically in the subsequent phases.[22]   This was revealed during the Interactions with the *Sarpanches / Panches /* Community members from the sample *Halqa Panchayats* in Jammu and Kashmir regions. Significantly, these leaders have their affiliations with different political parties, but their responses were more or less uniform.

- Because of no significant change in status/ no result after the B2V1, the local leadership were also demotivated, resulting in poor participation of community members in the subsequent phases.[23] They started viewing B2V programme in a routine manner like any other conventional programme with all its demerits.
- Initiating activities by ensuring the convergence of funds from multiple sources has entered into certain operational issues.[24] Delay in disbursement of funds has not created issues for the present but will also create difficulties in the future also.
- If organised regularly by bureaucracy and by taking a more pro-active stand than the elected representatives, such initiatives will gradually result in the generation of aversion in the minds of community towards the elected representatives. This is not a desirable trend in the democratic system.

Opportunities:

- An initiative like this could provide an opportunity for the bureaucracy to 'fill the vacuum' created by the absence of elected representatives.
- It enables the bureaucracy to develop compassion, empathy, and understanding of the field situation by ushering development and welfare to the target population by providing issue-based support on a priority.
- The absence of elected representatives in the area, owing to several internal and external factors, could result in serious socio-economic-political issues for the community for so many decades. In such a scenario, such 'soft touches' will have a cooling effect and positive impact in the 'hearts and minds' of the general public.
- It is expected to provide the requisite impetus to governance and development in J&K by providing an excellent opportunity for the citizens to enhance accountability and transparency in the political sub-system.
- Micro-level initiatives could result in early and appropriate follow-up actions on priority areas/ issues that the leadership largely ignored or inadequately attended for several years. For example, most of the areas highlighted the non-availability of their own building to Anganawadis.[25]
- Evidence-based policy initiatives could be made due to field-specific inputs.
- Micro-level initiatives could lead to useful inputs for the formulation of policy initiatives and interventions by the Local Government. For example, one of the Village Panchayats in India took the bold and creative step leading to the formulation of a 'Sports Policy'.[26]

Challenges:

- The absence of adequate follow-up has resulted in a drastic demoralising effect among the local leadership and the community. This was well reflected in the poor participation of community members as well as local leaders in the subsequent phases.[27] Regaining the confidence of leadership and the community will be a major challenge if the State Government wishes to sustain the efforts of B2V.
- With the reduced participation of the local leaders and community members, even the visiting officials started taking the B2V visits routinely, with no special significance attached.
- In many *Halqa Panchayats*, the official who visited the village for the second time differed from the first visit.[28] This resulted in poor continuity to the field realities, issues, problems and priority.

- Such initiatives for realising governance and development at the grassroots level may result in challenges/ threats in future, if such events are organised by not actively involving the elected representatives at different spheres of Government.
- Undesirable interference by the bureaucrats in the implementation of programmes was also reported.[29]
- Though there is no doubt about the motive and intention behind such initiatives, continuous practice of such initiatives will weaken the democratic system, which has its edifice built on the representation of the citizens as well as on the capacity, efficiency, and responsiveness of the elected representatives. The initiative could be broadly seen as a 'stop-gap arrangement' in the absence of a functional democratic and representative system for the people.

Outcomes

An attempt has been made to identify the results and follow-up of the initiative that was held in three phases - during 20 - 27 Jun 2019, 25 - 30 Nov 2019 and 2 - 12 Oct 2020. As a consequence of the abrogation of Article 370, bifurcation of the State into two Union Territories (UT of J&K and UT of Ladakh), there were several restrictions on communication and mobility in the area. Subsequently, the promulgation of the Citizenship Amendment Act has added fuel to the ongoing situation in certain regions/ pockets of the UT of J&K. In this situation, it was not possible to go for a detailed inquiry through personal visits to different parts of the region. Hence it was decided to take feedback from the elected functionaries of *Halqa Panchayats* from different parts. In addition, efforts were made to receive inputs from a cross-section of the community as well about their satisfaction level regarding the process of B2V and its outcomes. Accordingly, feedback was gathered from key informants from the selected *Halqa Panchayats* of the Jammu and Kashmir regions.

Details regarding the follow-up actions taken in the *Halqa Panchayats* after the B2V gave an interesting picture of the outcome and possible direction of the initiative.

(a) Increased enthusiasm: The rise in enthusiasm among the local population has been an important outcome of the initiative. The kind of enthusiasm the population shows, disregarding the aspects of age, gender, religion, community status, occupational status, economic level, etc., towards the B2V initiative, have been very promising.

(b) Revival of faith and trust in the system: The operationalisation of B2V in three phases has resulted in the revival of faith and trust of the community in the government system. This was introduced at a time when the expectations of the local population about different

Governments, from Local to the Centre, were found to be low.

(c) Community becoming more vocal and logical: In the process, community members across different regions, religions, categories, and economic statuses, have openly expressed their everyday needs, concerns, issues, problems, and priorities.[30] Significantly, this was beyond their conventional aspirations for local economic development, social justice, and civic functions, unlike previous occasions, where they either used to keep quiet during the discussions or keep away from such meetings.

(d) Active presence of Govt. officials: The mandatory instructions to the designated Govt. official (Senior Officers of Gazetted status) to spend two full days and one night In the village itself was revolutionary considering the conventions and practices of bureaucracy.[31] As part of the initiative, each designated official was instructed to stay in the village itself for the period, conduct formal/ informal interactions with different stakeholders, engage selected categories of population such as youth and women in focus groups discussions, participate in the Special *Grama Sabha* convened by the *Sarpanch* of the *Halqa Panchayat*, actively involve and participate in the discussions, document their issues/ problems and priorities of the area, etc. The duration they spent in the village, their proactive manner of seeking inputs from the community, their approach towards the people, etc., were a definite departure from the practices adopted during their routine visits in the past.

(e) Diversity of Govt. officials engaged in the exercise: Govt. officials from different State Govt. Departments were selected to be part of the B2V initiative.[32]

(f) Involvement of senior Govt. officials as Nodal officers/ Supervisors: As part of the initiative, Senior Govt. officials, including Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers from the J&K cadre or Kashmir Administrative Service (KAS) officers were given responsibility as Nodal Officers. This resulted in giving a serious touch to the whole exercise.

(g) Problem identification and prioritisation at a micro level: The exercise also helped the officials to prioritise the issues/ problems in a given locality through a participatory approach.

(h) Extensive use of participatory techniques in the process: The Senior officials generally started their field visits in the area by carrying out transect walks across the village. That was followed by community interactions and group discussions with various social categories like women, youth, farmers, etc. And they have also adopted participatory methods and techniques for data collection from the field.

(i) Documentation of community-oriented projects: Most of the

projects proposed by the local leadership and the community were in the areas of water supply, drainage, road construction, waste management, waiting shed, etc.[33] This was a clear difference from the earlier practice of raising demand for individual beneficiary schemes.

(j) Enhanced scope for convergence: B2V could bring in enormous scope for ensuring convergence of different programmes/ schemes by the Central, State, and Local Governments. Senior Govt. officials engaged in identifying the scope for convergence of resources in the field was ably facilitated by the key functionaries of the *Halqa Panchayats*, experienced community members, social activists, and other stakeholders. Thus, the initiative could find numerous opportunities to bring in multiple sources of revenue for realising different community development projects. In many places, convergence of Central Finance Commission allocations along with MGNREGS and other sources of revenues were ensured in the additional proposals made during the B2V initiative.[34]

(k) Forward and backward linkages: The initiative gave a perfect scope for establishing linkages and strengthening with the past projects. This could be realised to a greater extent due to the excellent facilitation by the key functionaries of the *Halqa Panchayat* (past as well as the present).

A close review of the various steps, sequence of activities and procedural steps / procedures of operationalisation of the B2V highlight that dedicated thrust and focus could bring about significant changes in the socio-economic-political eco system of the *Halqa Panchayats* and other areas. However, there is a need to revisit the utilitarian value of such initiatives, as many local leaders relate such initiatives as 'flash in the frying pan' with more cosmetic and short-term changes and without the serious, long term and significant impact on the ground. It was reported that many persons stayed away in the third phase owing to 'non-fulfilment of promises made during the previous rounds, the political uncertainty in the valley and the ill-timing of the programme when farmers are busy harvesting their crops.'[35]

Summing up

B2V is an ambitious, creative, and unique attempt to ensure citizen-centric governance at the grassroots level. It has the potential and possibility to empower citizens by enhancing the provision of basic services. Initiation of such an exercise in strategically located and politically sensitive area like Jammu and Kashmir is quite significant. Despite several merits, it may be seen as a 'stop gap arrangement' to provide a healing touch and soothing effect to the long pending issues

of the population in the absence of an elected State Government and 'weak Local Government system.'[36] However, to bring sustainable solutions at the grassroots, there is no better solution than empowering the Local Governments by devolving more funds, functions and functionaries.

It would be interesting to compare the process and results of the three phases of B2V programme as some of the *Halqa Panchayats* came into action, more actively in the second and third phases. In contrast, several others lost steam after the first phase. While appreciating the intent, motive, and initiative behind such an effort taken up in J&K, it is imperative to take up a comprehensive review of the programme.

Notes and References

1. Govt. of Jammu & Kashmir (GoJ&K). *Back to Village – Governance at the doorstep*, (Srinagar: GoJ&K, 2019), p.4.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. See Chakraborty, A., and Guha, K. *What to expect from the third phase of Back to Village programme*, (Srinagar: Jammu and Kashmir Policy Institute, 2020), p.1.
5. *Halqa Panchayat* is the basic administrative unit in the Panchayati Raj system in Jammu and Kashmir.
6. Ray, D., and Esteban, J. "Conflict and Development", *Annual Review of Economics*, 9, (2017), p.288.
7. Daniel, B. et.al. *Economic Development in conflict-affected Countries*, (Eschborn: GTZ GmbH, 2008), p.3.
8. Bruck, T., Justino, P. & Martin-Shields, C.P. *Conflict and Development*, WIDER Working paper 2017/178, (Helsinki: The United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research, 2017), p.4.
9. Kirk, T., Stein, D., and Fisher, A. *The Relationship between ethnic diversity & development : A diversity dividend?*, (London: Konung International, 2018), p.2.
10. See Narayan, Deepa (Ed.). *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction – A Source Book*, (Washington DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2002), p.31.
11. Though number of initiatives from different parts of India such as Operation Barga (West Bengal), *Prajala Vaddaku Palana* (Andhra Pradesh), *Jana Samparka Paripadi* (Kerala), Go To Village (Manipur) and *Duare Sarkar* (West Bengal) were noted, the B2V programme stands unique among them.
12. The word 'Sphere' is suggested here in place of Level, Tier or Stratum to indicate different forms of government from *Halqa Panchayat* to the Union Government. 'Spherical Autonomy' is one of the core

principles of decentralisation. It provides 'sufficient autonomy' to all the governments in their own domain, irrespective of their size, position and range of functions. The author views that the conventional words such as level, tier and strata undermine the 'spirit of spherical autonomy' along with reinforcing the pattern and practices of hierarchy in decentralised governance, which is not healthy.

13. Press Trust of India (PTI[a]). 2019. *J-K Govt. to organise 'Back to village' programme to reach out to people a grassroots level*, Srinagar, June 15.

14. Press Trust of India (PTI[b]). 2019. *5000 officers to visit panchayat in J-K for Back to Village-2 programme,* Srinagar, Nov 20.

15. Modi, Narendra. 2019. PM Modi appreciates 'Back to Village' programme in Jammu and Kashmir. Mann Ki Baat delivered through All India Radio, New Delhi, July 28.

16. PTI[b]., Ibid.

17. 'Languishing project' refers to a project that just sits on the shelf and never gets finished. An example of languish is a plant that is never watered and that gets sicker and sicker.

18. <www.budgam.nic.in> accessed on 02 Feb 2020.

19. Hassan, F. 2020. Back to village' 3.0: Govt attempts to bring governance to doorsteps in J&K. *Kashmir Monitor*, September 24, Srinagar edition.

20. Khajuria, R.K. 2020. J&K's back to village programme- 3 to focus on execution of first two editions. *Hindustan Times*, October 3, Jammu edition.

21. Interactions were held with Captain (Retd.) Hansraj, *Sarpanch*, Gagian *Halqa Panchayat*, RS Pura Block, Jammu District; and Surjit Kumar Choudhary, *Sarpanch*, Flora *Halqa Panchayat*, Suchetgarh Block, Jammu District. On similar lines, information was gathered from Bilal Ahmed Wani, *Sarpanch*, Soaf 'A' *Halqa Panchayat*, Breng Block, Kokernag Tehsil, Anantnag District; Shahzada Begum, *Sarpanch*, Safapora 'B' *Halqa Panchayat*, Safapora Block, Ganderbal District; and, Mohamed Tahir Quadri, Former *Upa-Sarpanch*, Gundkhalil *Halqa Panchayat*, and Member, District Development Council (DDC), Bandipora District. Interactions during Nov-Dec 2020 were made through mobile due to pandemic situations.

22. This was shared by Bilal Ahmed Wani, *Sarpanch*, Soaf 'A' *Halqa Panchayat*, Anantnag District during the interactions.

23. This was indicated by Mohammed Tahir Quadri, former *Upa-Sarpanch* of Gundkhalil *Halqa Panchayat* and Member, DDC, Bandipora District during the discussions.

24. This was explained in detail by Surjit Choudhary, *Sarpanch*, Flora *Halqa Panchayat*, Suchetgarh Block, Jammu District. As a follow-up of the B2V1, a work of 300 metre long metalled road was taken up by the *Halqa Panchayat* with equal funds from the 14th Central Finance Commission (CFC) grants and other sources. The contractor who completed the work on time was able to receive only the funds

allocated from 14th CFC but the remaining part is not yet received. The delay in making timely payment for completed works is a matter of embarrassment to the *Sarpanch* and other key functionaries of *Halqa Panchayats*.

25. This aspect was personally verified by author during a programme organised for the capacity building of the elected leaders of *Halqa Panchayats* of J & K held in RS Pura, Jammu in Aug 2019.

26. Bedadka *Grama Panchayat* of Kasaragod District in Kerala led by Adv. C Ramachandran as its President took an innovative step for the formulation of a 'Sports Policy for Bedadka GP' in a participatory manner involving all key stakeholders. In the run up to the finalisation of the draft policy document, the *Grama Panchayat* organised a 'Virtual Grama Sabha' through whatsapp which encouraged an active and productive discussion with several useful inputs in the exercise.

27. During the discussions with Mohammed Tahir Quadri, former *Upa-Sarpanch* of Gundkhalil *Halqa Panchayat* and Member, DDC of Bandipora District, it was known that he took personal interest in mobilising village community to actively participate during the visit of the Govt. official (A Senior Engineer from the Irrigation Department of J&K) to the village during the first phase of B2V. However, with no significant follow-up realised at the ground forced him to keep away from B2V2 as he felt embarrassed to face the community by raising their hopes further.

28. This was indicated by Captain (Retd.) Hansraj, *Sarpanch* of Gagian *Halqa Panchayat*, RS Pura Block, Jammu District; Surjit Kumar Choudhary, *Sarpanch*, Flora *Halqa Panchayat*, Suchetgarh Block, Jammu District; Tahir Quadri, Former *Upa-Sarpanch*, Gundkhalil *Halqa Panchayat* and Member, DDC, Bandipora District and Shahzada Begum, *Sarpanch*, Safapora 'B' *Halqa Panchayat*, Safapora Block, Ganderbal District during the discussions about the outcome of B2V initiatives. For example, in Flora *Halqa Panchayat*, an Executive Engineer from the Rural Development Department visited the area as part of B2V1 during June 2019. However, during B2V2 in Nov 2019, the visiting official was the Block Veterinary Officer, Nagrota Block, Jammu District. On similar lines, in Safapora 'B' *Halqa Panchayat*, it was the District Horticulture Officer, Ganderbal and BDO, Wakura Block, Ganderbal during the B2V1 and B2V2 respectively.

29. This comment was made by Janab Shareeq Ahmad Mir, President of All Jammu and Kashmir *Panchayat* Association and reported in the daily Kashmir Monitor on 24 Sep 2020.

30. This was shared by Mohammed Tahir Quadri, former *Upa-Sarpanch*, Gundkhalil *Halqa Panchayat*, and Member, DDC, Bandipora District during the discussions about the outcome of B2V initiatives.

31. This matter was highlighted by Captain (Retd.) Hansraj, *Sarpanch*, Gagian *Halqa Panchayat*, RS Pura Block, Jammu District during the

discussions about the outcome of B2V initiatives.

32. This was indicated by Shahzada Begum, *Sarpanch*, Safapora 'B' *Halqa Panchayat*, Ganderbal District and Surjit Choudhary, *Sarpanch*, Flora *Halqa Panchayat*, Jammu District during the discussions.

33. This matter was shared by Janab Shabir Ahmed Bhat, Social Activist, Safapora 'B' *Halqa Panchayat*, Ganderbal District during the interactions.

34. This aspect was shared by Surjit Choudhary, *Sarpanch*, Flora *Halqa Panchayat*, Jammu District during the discussions about the outcome of B2V initiatives.

35. Malik, I.A. 2020. Why Has the 'Back to Village' Programme Failed to Take-Off in Kashmir ?, *The Wire*, October 13, Srinagar.

36. 'Weak' Local Government does not indicate that the *Halqa Panchayats* in Jammu and Kashmir are weak. It is used to highlight the lack of thrust for devolution of functions, funds and functionaries by the State/ UT to the Local Governments to the desirable extent for them to function as 'Institutions of Self Government'.

K GIREESAN is Director-SOG, School of Government, MIT World Peace University, Kothrud, Pune – 411 038. Mobile: 9445400855; E-mail: gireesan.k@mitwpu.edu.in; gireesan.decentralisation@ gmail.com

Articles

Malabika Pande: Gandhi on Religion and Social Harmony • *Muhammad Tajuddin:* Dialectic of Peace • *Birinder Pal Singh:* Gandhian Perspective on Tribal Resources and the Modern State • *K.P. Mishra:* Gandhian Views on Democracy • *Ramashray Roy:* Decentralized Political Order: The Gandhian Perspective • *J. Prabhash:* Politics of Presence: Socio-Economic Background of Members of Kerala Legislature Assembly: 1957-2006 • *Shukhdeba Sharma Hanjabam:* Mapping Nonviolent Movements inConflict-Ridden Manipur • *Kaushikee:* Gandhian Nonviolent Action: A Case Study of Aung San Suu Kyi's Struggle in Mayanmar • *Sabu Thomas:* 'Cyber Protests and Electronic Disobedience': Examining Non-Violence in Times of Cyber Politics • *Prem Anant Mishra:* Sartorial is Political : Gandhi's Experiments with Clothing: Imitation, Loyalty and Rebellion

Notes and Comments

Thomas Weber: Gandhi Today: In the Field and in the Academy: An Outsider's Observations • *Ananta Kumar Giri:* Knowking Together in Compassion and Confrontation: Social Movements, Gift of Knowledge and the Challange of Transformations • *Juby John Eipe, Tittoo Varghese, Santhosh Mathew Veranani:* "India Against Corruption" Movement: An Online Version of a Non-Violent Mass Movement • *Anupma Kaushik:* Burmese Gandhi: Aung San Suu Kyi

Review Article

Antony Copley: Contra Anderson

Book Reviews

Ravi P Bhatia: K T S Sarao, *The Decline of Buddhism in India*