

## EMPOWERING RURAL COMMUNITIES: ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF THE BACK TO VILLAGE PROGRAM IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

**Ramparshad Singh<sup>1</sup> (Research Scholar)**

Department of Political Science Bhagwant University Ajmer, Rajasthan

Email: [prashadmanhas@gmail.com](mailto:prashadmanhas@gmail.com)

**Dr. Nand Kishore Somani<sup>2</sup> (Supervisor)**

Prof. Department of Political Science Bhagwant University Ajmer, Rajasthan

Email: [snehasomani28@gmail.com](mailto:snehasomani28@gmail.com)

\*Correspondence: [prashadmanhas@gmail.com](mailto:prashadmanhas@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*This research paper delves into the effectiveness and impact of the Back to Village (B2V) program initiated by the Government of Jammu and Kashmir in the Union Territory of J&K. The B2V program aims to promote grassroots democracy and expedite rural development by facilitating direct interaction between government officials and local communities. The paper examines various aspects of the program, including community engagement, implementation challenges, and the effects on rural infrastructure, education, healthcare, and employment. Using diverse methodologies of data collection including field visits and interviews, the paper comprehensively analyzes community feedback and participation levels. While there have been significant improvements in public service delivery and development, certain challenges related to implementation and sustainability persist. Policy implications and recommendations for enhancing the program's effectiveness are discussed, along with suggestions for future research. The study underscores the importance of community involvement in rural governance and provides valuable insights for policymakers aiming to improve rural development strategies in Jammu and Kashmir.*

**Keywords:** *Back to Village, Community, Governance, Development, Infrastructure, Participatory*

### INTRODUCTION

The Back to Village (B2V) program is a unique flagship initiative launched by the Government of Jammu and Kashmir in June 2019. This is the sole public outreach program which is considered as the festival of development, public participation and public awareness. As per the programme, government officials need to reach out at each Panchayat in the UT of J&K, where they have to stay for determined days to get firsthand information from the local representatives and public regarding their miseries to bring improvement and deliver rural development services. The program aims to promote grassroots democracy and participatory development to build a connection between the government and rural society.

It is a step towards ensuring sustainable changes in the socio-economic conditions of rural areas in Jammu and Kashmir, directly involving the rural population in the development of their villages. The program has had a significant impact on rural life in Jammu & Kashmir. However, the hilly topography and rugged mountains of J&K pose diverse socio-economic challenges that have affected local governance, democracy, community involvement, and participatory development under the initiative. The Back to Village Programme (B2V) offers hope for rural development in all districts of the UT. It demonstrates the importance of good governance, which involves listening to the needs of the people, understanding their distinct challenges, and working together to create a better future. It highlights a path where development begins with the voices and aspirations of the people.

### Historical Background of the Back to Village (B2V) Programme in J&K

Long ago Mahatma Gandhi Ji stressed the need for the promotion of cottage industries in villages. He believed that most of the people in India reside in villages and are dependent on agrarian activities for their livelihood. So, the government need to involve rural people in the process of village governance for initiating their transformation and self-sufficiency. The same is

the case of the people of Jammu & Kashmir where most of the population inhabits rural areas and are dependent on agricultural activities for earning their livelihood. Since time immemorial they continued to face tremendous miseries in the socio-political arena at the grassroot level.<sup>i</sup> Empowering the standard of rural life, the Government of J&K initiated a catalyst programme known as Back to Village (B2V) throughout the UT of J&K in June 2019. During this program, 4291 officers ranging from the rank of Administrative Secretary to Under Secretary were assigned to Panchayats for two days. Their goal was to interact with the local community and gather feedback to customize government initiatives aimed at enhancing the delivery of services tailored to the needs of each village. Though it aimed to collect first-hand information on the ground realities of rural life. The Back to Village programme in J&K is a determined initiative of the government to make the living standard of villagers better by providing governance services at their doorsteps. It brought the functionaries of government and village representatives on a common platform. The B2V programme second which started in November 2019 was based on the slogan of meeting the gaps acknowledged in the inaugural phase (B2V1). It also aimed at mitigating the burning problems of villagers instantly.<sup>ii</sup>

The focus of B2V3 in October 2020 was the saturation of welfare programmes by redressing the long-term developmental needs of rural people. The preparatory phase, known as Jan Abhiyan Week, for the Fourth phase of the Back to Village Programme, took place from 15th to 26th October 2022 throughout the UT of Jammu and Kashmir. The focus was on self-employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for youth and women, skill development, self-employment opportunities, good governance, and the implementation of the Panchayati Raj system. B2V4 was perceived as a festival of government services by the people. In the fourth phase of B2V, the Chief Secretary of J&K UT Dr Arun Kumar Mehta has suggested 12 points for planning activities. These points included the Nasha Mukht Abhiyan, functioning of Patwaris and Village Level Workers (VLWs), availability of officers in Panchayats, functioning of the school complex system, Amrit Sarovars, Swachh Gram, and convergence meetings once a month in villages where all departments were present.<sup>iii</sup> During this time, 20,000 development works were identified directly by the people, with more than 7,000 already completed.

Additionally, a total of 19645 loan cases were disbursed, including 6,679 to women entrepreneurs. The essence of the 'Back to Village' program is to emphasize the importance of ensuring people's participation right from the start, not just as agents in the execution of development works, but as owners of the entire programs of the government in earlier phases focussing on digital services, and collection of data by ensuring comprehensive coverage of welfare initiatives.<sup>iv</sup> Thus in the last five phases, the Back to Village (B2V) program in Jammu and Kashmir has shown tangible results. The union territory conducted a grand Jan Abhiyan/Awami Muhim, through which the administration reached out to the villages to improve governance. During the program, rural inhabitants received various services like their Domicile certificates, Self-Employment Loans, Sehat Golden Cards, Pension Payments, and access to Land Records Online, all at their doorsteps.

## Objectives of the Back to Village Programme in J&K

The Back to Village (B2V) program in the UT of J&K is a unique governmental initiative aimed at improving living standards in rural areas. It was designed to bridge the gap between the administration and the local population by having government officials visit rural areas and interact with the people. The program focuses on understanding the needs and grievances of the rural population and providing immediate solutions. It uses a bottom-up approach to policy planning and aims to build trust between the people and the government. Government officials engage directly with the village panchayats and hold community meetings to discuss local issues, development priorities, and government schemes. The program also assesses the developmental needs of the rural areas and provides feedback on the local administration and implementation of government schemes at the grassroots level.<sup>v</sup>

The government plans to launch capacity-building programs for panchayat members to educate villagers and their representatives. These programs aim to assess the level of basic amenities, report on infrastructure development, create job opportunities for rural unemployed individuals and promote financial inclusion for rural residents. The official machinery is responsible for guiding and assisting with the implementation of these programs. The goal is to encourage rural communities to take full advantage of these initiatives.<sup>vi</sup> Additionally, the programs aim to provide budget information, ensure transparency and accountability, address local grievances, and include marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Self Help Groups (SHGs) of women, and other economically disadvantaged sections of society. The Back to Village (B2V) program has a broad focus on strengthening village panchayats in the UT of Jammu and Kashmir. In addition to enhancing democracy at the grassroots level, it aims to foster a sense of meaningful inclusion among rural residents in the development process. Thus, the Back to Village programme is determined to emphasize the significance of safeguarding the rights of rural people not merely as agents in the implementation of developmental works but as owners of the entire programme.<sup>vii</sup>

## Impacts of the Back to Village (B2V) Programme in Jammu and Kashmir

The Back to Village program engaged residents of villages and government officials in a collaborative effort to achieve equitable development across all rural areas. It empowered all 4483 Panchayats of the UT and directed development efforts through community participation. The program instilled in rural communities a desire for a decent standard of living. As part of the program, each senior officer was assigned to a Gram Panchayat and required to stay for at least two days, including spending a night in the village, to engage with Panchayat representatives, village elders, and other locals to understand their concerns, development needs, and economic potential of the area. The Back to Village program has gained momentum in all 22 districts of the J&K UT, with district-level officers, tehsil-level officers, and block-level officers and officials visiting their areas to interact with the villagers to understand their problems and obtain much-needed feedback.

## Community Engagement and Empowerment

When the Back to Village Programme was initially launched by the government of Jammu and Kashmir in respective districts of the UT. There was much enthusiasm among the people of both divisions of the J&K UT. People considered it as the missionary and historical step of the Government to minimize their worries at their doorsteps. People in large numbers came forward to take part in the programme to interact with the officials of Back to Village during their visit hours in respective districts of the UT. The initiative was a milestone in the process of rural upliftment and reconstruction. The direct interaction between the officials of the government and residents brought them closer to discussing various governance and developmental issues at a common platform and laid the further blueprint for rural reconstruction. It led to more activism of rural people in organising Gram Sabhas regarding governance and decision-making processes. The rural masses have been given a stage to raise their voices to present their issues, propose plans, and give feedback on various government schemes through effective involvement.

## Infrastructure Development

The Back to Village Programme in Jammu & Kashmir provided an opportunity for the village people to bring forward the issues which were hindering the development of infrastructure. There were various areas in the hilly terrains of the UT where the absence of road connectivity and poor infrastructure in health, education and other sectors destined to provide basic public facilities afflicted enormous inconveniences.<sup>viii</sup> The B2V programme proved productive in recording all the reports regarding the infrastructure status in education, health and Panchayati raj, communication and transport, drinking water, electricity, Swachh Bharat Mission, tourism and other developmental activities in rural areas.

On viewing the status report the programme covered various rural infrastructure improvement schemes in various districts in the UT. As per Jammu and Kashmir Order No. Dated: 04-09-2019 the finance department of Jammu & Kashmir Sanctioned Rs 1.21.00 crore with Rs 5.00 crore each to the Divisional Commissioner Jammu/Divisional Commissioner Kashmir and Rs 1.00 crore to Divisional Commissioner Ladakh and Rs 5.00 crore each to 22 District Development Commissioners for undertaking works identified in respective "Panchayat Halqas" of all the districts in respect of demands raised during "Back to Village" Programme held from 20<sup>th</sup> June to 27<sup>th</sup> June 2019. The District Development Commissioner of each district were issued directions that high-priority works with due impact and high visibility should be implemented as part of "the "Back to Village" Programme in convergence with other schemes based on reports finalized by officers during their visit.<sup>ix</sup> Although funds were scarce under the programme regarding the development of infrastructure yet, it pooled some funds for the construction and repair of roads and enhanced some developmental activities for upgrading public facilities such as schools, healthcare centres and drinking water facilities.

## Education and Healthcare

After taking first-hand information, the visiting officers of the B2V programme identified school infrastructure issues regarding the status of buildings, classrooms, sanitation facilities, availability of drinking water, and vacancies of teachers, which further led to improvement and accountability at the lowest sphere. Various activities under Khelo India, Drug Abuse, and Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan involving students at the school level were organised. Under the programme where Back to Village officers camped in designated schools during their visit the initiatives for increasing student enrolment and reducing the dropout rate were started with community engagements. In response to the initiative, there has been perceptible enhancement in the enrolment of students, renovation of school buildings and allocation of centrally and state-sponsored scholarship schemes to the students belonging to the sections of Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Castes. In the field of healthcare, the program has facilitated the establishment of new healthcare centres and the upgrading of existing ones, improving access to medical services for the rural population. The officials of the healthcare department accompanied the visiting officer had raised awareness about health issues, hygiene, and preventive healthcare, which can lead to better health outcomes. The programme made the observatory plan for the needs and necessities of healthcare services, emergency response mechanisms and preparedness for healthcare calamities in remote and needy areas in J&K.

## Economic Development

The Back to Village program has created numerous employment opportunities for youth and women through various entrepreneurial schemes in rural areas. Several skill development programs and initiatives have been introduced to train unskilled workers at the village level. Furthermore, individuals involved in agricultural activities are being trained to implement new technologies in the farming sector to double their production and income. In 2021 Jammu and Kashmir's Lieutenant Governor, Sh. Manoj Sinha declared that under the Back to Village program, almost 50,000 young people will be provided support to become entrepreneurs in the union territory through financial assistance.<sup>x</sup>

The administration has already disbursed ₹340 crores in loans to 19,600 youths from across the UT during the initial two phases of the program. As per the reports of the Hindustan Times about 19,600 youths were given more than Rs. 340 crores of financial assistance to make them independent economically who will also become a source of earning a livelihood to other families.<sup>xi</sup>

## Social Welfare and Inclusion

Through the Back to Village program the rural populace in remotest areas of UT are covered under multiple welfare schemes. Meant for community participation and empowerment the visiting officials ensured maximum inclusion of villagers by seeking their involvement and suggestions. For that, the Prabhari officers conducted Gram Sabhas along with other departmental dealing officials in Panchayats to enlighten them about different social welfare schemes of the government. This includes the officials from rural development, agriculture, sheep husbandry, fishery, animal husbandry, banks, revenue, health, forest, social welfare, education, horticulture and other departments. For example, in Ramban district, during different phases of B2V events, officials of multiple departments set up information desks to educate villagers about different government schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) for housing and the Ayushman Bharat scheme for healthcare, other loan and financial assistance schemes under various categories and many eligible beneficiaries were registered on the spot. The extensive implementation of welfare programs has guaranteed that benefits reach the most marginalized segments of society. Initiatives related to housing, social security, and financial inclusion have been actively encouraged.

B2V in UT of J&K emphasises much on the development and generation of job opportunities for youths and women to promote self-dependence and economic inclusion. Therefore, in various districts of the UT for developing skills and employment multiple vocational training programs were organized as part of the B2V initiative. These programs provided training in trades like tailoring, carpentry, and computer skills, enabling participants to start their businesses or seek better employment opportunities. The initiative for women's empowerment is seen under the program as it stresses establishing various self-help groups and micro-finance initiatives, ultimately enhancing their socio-economic status. In promoting local culture and heritage the B2V program nurtures a sense of pride and belongingness among the rural masses which is significant for greater inclusion and cohesion. Several such cultural events were organized in different districts of J&K representing local folk songs, local traditions, crafts and music. Back to Village program in Jammu and Kashmir is a comprehensive approach to rural development that emphasizes social welfare and inclusion. By directly engaging with communities, addressing their specific needs, and ensuring the delivery of essential services, the program has made significant strides in improving the lives of people in the region

## Implementation Challenges of Back to Village in J&K

The "Back to Village" (B2V) program in Jammu and Kashmir aims to promote grassroots development by involving government officials with local communities. The program has identified several ambitious goals and implementation challenges. The program focuses on village panchayats but faces multiple logistical issues due to poor accessibility and harsh weather conditions in the region. In the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, many villages are situated in remote, high-altitude, and mountainous regions with limited road connectivity, making it difficult for officials to reach these areas. In some cases, officials have to travel over 20 km on foot only to cover the population of a single Panchayat. Furthermore, harsh winter weather, including snowfall and low temperatures in the Pir Panjal Range of the Himalayas, can impede travel and the execution of development activities.

Due to certain ongoing insurgency and militancy incidents in various districts across the Jammu and Kashmir Union Territory, it is risky for the visiting officials as well as representatives to pay a visit to the designated panchayats to interact with the rural populace. The current security situation in certain parts of Jammu and Kashmir poses a significant risk to the safe movement and activities of officials in remote areas without proper security insurance. Civil unrest, political instability, and protests can also disrupt the program's activities and deter participation from both officials and locals. Challenges also exist due to resource constraints under the program, as there is inadequate funding for carrying out any development project. Visiting officers of B2V have insufficient funding to launch any developmental project or fulfil the essential needs of the public in rural areas. They can only record the problems of the people but have no power to execute the projects. They have not been allotted any financial resources and funds to allot for fulfilling the

demands of the rural people, effectively leaving them powerless. This has led to resentment from stakeholders and rural people in participating in the programs due to unaddressed demands during earlier visits by these officers. Adequate funding is essential for the success of the program. However, financial constraints can limit the scope and effectiveness of developmental projects. Historical grievances and a lack of trust in government initiatives can lead to scepticism and reduced participation from local communities. Low levels of awareness and education among villagers about the program's objectives and benefits can hinder effective engagement. Additionally, a lack of inter-departmental coordination has resulted in many departments not taking the program seriously. Effective implementation requires seamless coordination among various government departments, which can sometimes be challenging.

### Long-Term Sustainability of the Programme

To ensure the long-term sustainability of the progress made through the B2V program in Jammu & Kashmir, a comprehensive approach is necessary. This should include upgraded infrastructure, bolstered security measures, increased funding, improved coordination among government agencies, and active community involvement. Continuous support from institutions and the government is essential to maintain the momentum of development activities initiated under the B2V program in all districts of J&K. Capacity-building programs are of utmost importance to ensure the long-term sustainability of the B2V program in the region. Therefore, strengthening the capacity of local institutions and communities to manage and sustain development initiatives needs to be carried out at regular intervals. Establishing robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the impact and make necessary adjustments to the program is also of great significance.

### CONCLUSION

The Back to Village program has made a significant impact on empowering and governing the rural population of Jammu and Kashmir. It has addressed crucial issues such as infrastructure, education, healthcare, economic development, and social welfare. Despite facing challenges, the program's focus on participatory development and grassroots democracy has empowered rural communities and established a firm foundation for sustainable development. The program's central philosophy is for government officers to immerse themselves in village life and gain direct insight into the challenges and aspirations of rural communities. By being present in these villages, officers can overcome bureaucratic barriers and engage directly with the people. This approach involves not only listening to the villagers' concerns but also actively participating in solving their problems. However, the success of this approach will be achieved when these visiting administrators are provided with financial allocations to address the long-standing issues of rural people on the spot. Creating a proper roadmap with suitable empowerment is necessary for visiting officers to ensure the accountability and transparency of the departments working for the upliftment of these remote areas. Adequate budgetary provisions for Prabhari officers of Back to Village are of great significance to uplift the needy and deserving areas. Timely suitable funding for road connectivity, education, health, and the development of the tourism industry in rural areas can also contribute to the greater success of this program in this mountainous region.

### REFERENCES

- ❖ <sup>1</sup> Ehsan, Mir, Jammu & Kashmir: The third phase of Back to Village for resolution of local issues begins, Hindustan Times Srinagar, October 2, 2020.

## ii **Press Trust of India, J& Amp; K; K; K 'Back-To-Village' Programme Getting Massive Response, Srinagar, 14 June 2019.**

- ❖ <sup>iii</sup> Kumar, Parveen. Back to Village: A Democratic Innovation, Rising Kashmir, October, 30,2022.
- ❖ <sup>iv</sup> Mir Amin, JAN ABHIYAN: Back to Village, Commissioner Secretary Social Welfare Department Convened an Important Meeting with Heads of Departments Regarding Jan Abhiyan and Upcoming Back to Village, October 23, 2022.
- ❖ <sup>v</sup> Empowering Rural Communities: The Back to Village Programme in Jammu and Kashmir. Socioconcerngroupkashmir.
- ❖ <sup>vi</sup> Chakraborty, Arka and Guha, Kasturi. Back to Village Commentary: What to expect from the third phase of the 'Back to Village' programme, JK Policy Institute September 20, 2020.
- ❖ <sup>vii</sup> Sharma, Arun. Four years of J&K 'Back to Village': locals say non-starter, Officials Defend Scheme Four years later, as UT administration holds the fourth phase of the week-long programme across J&K from October 27, members of the same village panchayat are a disappointed lot. Indian Express, November 3, 2022.
- ❖ <sup>viii</sup> Anonyms, B2V-5: Good Governance Initiatives in Jammu and Kashmir, Greater Kashmir, November 13, 2023.
- ❖ <sup>ix</sup> Government Of Jammu and Kashmir Finance Department Civil Secretariat, Srinagar! Jammu.
- ❖ <sup>x</sup> Hindustan Times, Jammu and Kashmir's Back to Village Scheme to Fund 50,000 Youths this year: L. G, June 17, 2021.