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Engaged Governance and Back to Village (B2V) Programme in Jammu and Kashmir: Citizen Direct Participation in Public Policy Process

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ABSTRACT

The regional instability, delayed election, and poor devolution of power, as well as resources to Panchayats in Jammu and Kashmir, have negatively impacted the capability of the Panchayati Raj Institutions to deliver services in rural areas. In this context, in 2019, the government of Jammu and Kashmir launched the Back to Village (B2V) Program to promote and facilitate public participation, decentralized planning, doorstep governance, and enhance public service delivery in Panchayats. This programme facilitated the integrated participatory planning, by engaging the governmental officials, frontline officials, elected representatives of the panchayats as well as the local residents of panchayats, to identify and prioritize the developmental priorities. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the Back to Village (B2V) Programme, analysing its objectives and implementation. The direct interaction of officials with village communities has improved participatory planning and targeted delivery of public services in the panchayats. The analysis of the programme is based on the detailed review of existing literature, policy documents and public feedback to provide a comprehensive understanding of the programme.



Keywords: Public Policy, Back to Village (B2V), Decentralized planning, Participatory governance.



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INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1980s, the concept of good governance, as promoted by the United Nations, the World Bank, and others, has become a guiding framework for policy formulation and program implementation worldwide. It is increasingly recognized as essential not only in the functioning of government at the Union and state levels, but also at the municipal and panchayat levels, where consensus-driven participatory planning enhances legitimacy and public trust (Connelly, 2011; Pomeranz & Stedman, 2020; Leong et al., 2009). It advocates transparency, inclusivity, accountability, and responsiveness to ensure that corruption is minimized, the voices of marginalized groups are heard, and policies effectively address both present and future societal needs (Graham et al., 2003; Raman, 2025). In the bottom-up approach of policy making, it means “listening to the people at their doorsteps, understanding the circumstances in which they are living, feeling a pinch of the difficulties that impact their lives,

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and finding a way out of it". To facilitate the bottom-up approach in governance in rural areas, the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have gradually evolved in India as a decentralized form of government, where each village is responsible for its own affairs (Bhat M. S., 2018, p. 3). However, the interpretation and execution of these principles and their assessment remain an area of debate in Jammu and Kashmir (Waza, 2018). The state was among the lowest performing states in India on various parameters of local governance, especially the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) Devolution Report 2015-16 (TISS & M/o PR, 2016, pp. 5-9).

In Jammu and Kashmir, community participation in rural areas remains a major concern for the government (Iqbal, 2021, pp. 81-83). To fill the vacuum created due to the constant delay in the local bodies election (Wani, 2019, p. 228), by the absence of effective public participation in the governance of the panchayat (Wani, 2019, pp. 92-93), the Back to Village (B2V) programme was launched in June, 2019 by Jammu and Kashmir government, as an innovative initiative to bridge the gap exist between the administration and rural communities. This programme was designed to promote participatory planning, enhance service delivery, and strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Jammu and Kashmir by directly engaging government officials with village communities (Singh & Somani, 2024, p. 102). It was executed in multiple steps, each focusing on assessing local needs, empowering grassroots institutions, and fostering citizen-government collaboration (Deptt. of RD&PR, J&K, 2023). By prioritizing doorstep governance and direct interaction between government officials and rural communities, it seeks to identify and address rural developmental challenges in a bottom-up manner.

Political Context and the Launch of the Back to Village (B2V) Programme

In 2018, the political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir underwent a major shift. The coalition government led by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) collapsed in June 2018 due to their political disagreements. This resulted in the imposition of Governor's Rule under Article 92 of the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir, which allows the Governor to exercise full executive authority. After months of political deadlock, the Legislative Assembly was dissolved on November 20, 2018, and President's Rule was imposed under Article 356 of the Indian Constitution (Gireesan K. , 2022, p. 137).

Under this context, the Local Bodies election was held in Jammu and Kashmir between (October & November, 2018), which marked a crucial step in revitalizing grassroots democracy after the years of political uncertainty in rural governance (Bhat et al., 2022). These elections led to the formation of Halqa Panchayats, intended to empower local governance structures. However, despite their establishment, these institutions remained largely inactive due to bureaucratic inertia and a robust participatory framework. Against this backdrop of political instability, the Back to Village (B2V) Programme was launched under Governor's Rule as a transformative initiative to reinvigorate decentralized governance, strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and foster participatory rural Development (Singh & Somani, 2024, pp. 102-103). The primary objectives of B2V included:

- *Energizing PRIs* to enhance their role in rural local governance (Chakraborty & Guha, 2020).
- *Gathering real-time feedback* from rural stakeholders on the implementation of government schemes and welfare programs (Chakraborty & Guha, 2020).
- *Identifying the economic potential of different regions* to promote sustainable livelihood opportunities (Gireesan K. , 2022, p. 141).
- *Assessing and prioritizing developmental needs* at the village level through direct citizen engagement (Gireesan K. , 2022, p. 141).

The defining feature of the B2V initiative was its interactive governance model, where government directly engaged with village communities to understand their grievances, needs and aspirations. The programme also stressed to resource mapping, problem identification and evidence-based policymaking, ensuring that development efforts were tailored to local socio-economic realities.

Implementation Framework of the Back to Village (B2V) Programme

To ensure the effective execution of the Back to Village (B2V) programme, a comprehensive implementation framework was designed, incorporating institutional coordination, identification and deployment of officials, resource planning and community engagement mechanisms. For the better understanding, the implementation framework of the B2V, has been studied under the following steps:

- i. Administrative Preparedness to B2V Field Visit
- ii. Field Visit and Public Response Gathering
- iii. Reporting and prioritizing future action plan

Under these steps, following action was taken for the effective execution of the B2V programme.

Step 1: Administrative Preparedness for B2V Field Visit

The first step in the implementation of B2V focused on the establishment of administrative structure to monitor and coordinate the execution of the programme. At the district level, a coordination cell was established to monitor and supervise the process. The District Coordination Cell ensures that all activities are aligned with the programme objectives. Additionally, Sub-Divisional level coordination cells were established to facilitate the communication between district and Halqa Panchayats.

To ensure effective ground implementation, in this scheme, over 25,000 government employees participated at all level, including 4,500 Gazetted Officer, who directly deployed to Panchayat for the Field Visit (Deptt. of RD, Govt. of J&K, 2022). The key officials (Liaison Officer, Reporting Officer (RO) and Facilitators) were identified and assigned with specific responsibilities. Liaison officers were responsible to ensure smooth coordination between district and local functionaries. Reporting Officers (Gazetted officers) were deployed in Panchayats with the task to lead field visits, interacting with local communities, frontier officers, report making and assessing developmental needs. The facilitators were designated to assist and provide logistic support.

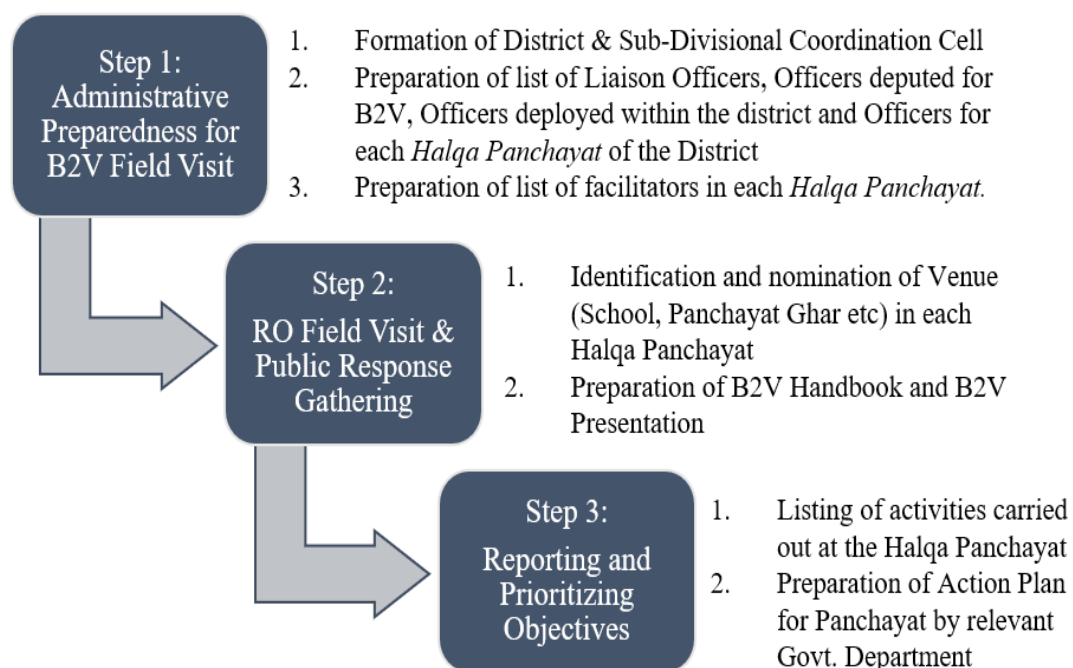


Figure 1: Policy Framework of Back to Village (B2V) Programme

Source: Design according to B2V Module, [\(Deptt. of RD&PR, J&K, 2024\)](#)

Step 2: Field Visit and Public Response Gathering

After the establishment of administrative structure, in next step, the Reporting Officials (RO) were deployed to Panchayats for direct engagement with rural communities. The RO were assigned to specific Halqa Panchayats, where they conducted field visits, interacted with residents and assessed the local governance challenges. They are designated to review the delivery of government schemes, identify gaps in service provision and document the developmental needs of each panchayat.

During these field visits, Reporting Officers (RO) and other frontier officials held meetings with elected representative and local residents and ensure an open dialogue between government representatives and the people. These discussions focused on evaluating the effectiveness of existing policies, identifying issues related to infrastructure, social welfare, economic development and gathering first feedback on governance and service delivery. Officials undertook resource mapping exercise to assess the available resources of panchayats aiming to identify potential for economic growth.

Additionally, the ROs were designated to gather responses from primary stakeholder, including farmers, women, youth and marginalized communities. Their feedback provided critical insights into livelihood challenges and their accessibility to governmental schemes. While gathering their responses, the ROs ensured that their interventions were people-centric.

Step 3: Reporting and Prioritizing Future Course of Action

The final step in the B2V implementation framework involved preparation of the report (as per the B2V Handbook) and formulation of list of activities or targets for future course of action. The insights from the field visits were compiled into B2V Handbook which included the key finding, governance gaps and observations as well as recommendations for improvement. At this step, several government departments such as Rural Development, Agriculture, Health, Education etc., conducted a list of activities at panchayat level and also prepared sector-specific action plan at panchayat level. These activities were aligned with existing government schemes and PRIs initiatives, ensuring that resource allocation and policy implementation were guided by actual community needs.

In the phase 4th and 5th of the B2V, a list of deliverable targets was provided to deliver to the concerned Panchayats. In the 4th phase, 20 targets including distribution of Golden Health Cards, Land Passbooks, Inheritance Mutations, Self-Employment Drive, Pani Samities meeting etc., were listed to deliver. Similarly, under 5th phase, 35 departments prepared a list of activities to be conducted at the panchayat level.

Phases of Back to Village (B2V) Programme

Since its inception in 2019, the B2V programme has undergone five phases [\(Deptt. of RD&PR, J&K, 2024\)](#), each aiming to enhance participatory planning, identifying developmental needs, address key infrastructural gaps and provide doorstep governance at the panchayat level. The programme evolved through each phase, addressing specific challenges and refining its approach to rural development in Jammu and Kashmir.

Phase 1 (20-27 June, 2019)

The first phase of the B2V programme marked the official beginning of direct engagement between government officials and rural communities. The primary objective of this phase was to identify local developmental needs, enhance citizen participation in governance and identifying priority areas for development. During this phase, 4,291 panchayats were surveyed, with officials conducting on-ground visits to interact with the communities. Of the surveyed panchayats, 4,084 panchayats uploaded their booklets on the B2V portal, while 207 failed to do so, which highlights the areas for administrative improvements [\(Deptt. of RD&PR, J&K, 2024\)](#).

Phase 2 (25-30, December, 2019)

Based on the insights gathered in the first phase, the second phase of the B2V focused on identifying the gaps in infrastructure, evaluating service delivery and improvement in delivery of governmental and welfare services and schemes. The key highlights of this phase were the improved participation and compliance by local bodies. Out of the 4,291 panchayats, 4,181 successfully uploaded their booklets on the B2V portal, while 110 failed to do so. The increased level of participation indicates growing awareness and engagement among rural stakeholders, which further shows the way for more effective governance (Deptt. of RD&PR, J&K, 2024).

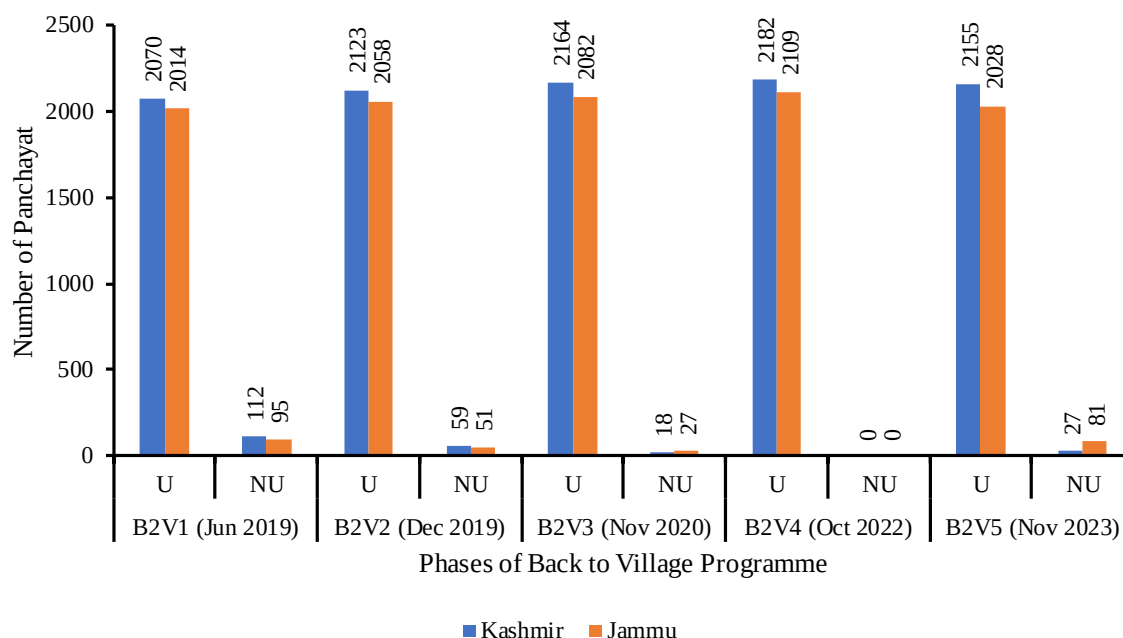


Figure 2: Division-wise total number of Panchayats and their status of B2V report on B2V Portal

Source: B2V Portal, Data compiled from <https://jkpanchayat.jk.gov.in/backtovillagereport.php> [

Phase 3 (02-12 November, 2020)

The third phase of B2V aimed to assess policy effectiveness and ensure the implementation of actionable plans based on the feedback collected in previous phases. The government officials focused on evaluating the progress of developmental initiatives, addressing concerns raised by the communities and making necessary policy adjustments to improve service delivery. In this phase, the public feedback collected from the villagers was directly incorporated into governance decisions. A significant outcome of this phase was the increase in the number of Panchayats successfully reporting their progress, with 4,246 booklets uploaded and only 45 panchayats failed to upload their booklets on the B2V portal (Deptt. of RD&PR, J&K, 2024).

Phase 4 (15 October – 03, November, 2022)

By the fourth phase, the B2V programme shifted its focus from planning and evaluation to monitoring and executing key developmental initiatives. This phase introduced 20 key “actionable deliverables” targets, which included, distribution of 10,00,000 Golden Health Cards, identification of 20 candidates per panchayat under HIMAYAT and other employment schemes, Land Passbook etc. (Deptt. of RD, Govt. of J&K, 2022).

This phase placed significant emphasis on transparency and accountability. As result all 4,291 surveyed panchayats successfully uploaded their reports, making a significant improvement in governance and reporting mechanism (Deptt. of RD&PR, J&K, 2024).

Phase 5 (15-16 November, 2023)

The fifth phase of B2V programme aimed to institutionalize participatory governance and ensure the sustainability of developmental initiatives. This phase focused on expanding service delivery and increasing inter-departmental coordination for more effective implementation of the programme. The major highlight of this phase was the involvement of 35 government departments, including Agriculture Production Department, Rural Development Department, Information Technology, Finance Department, Health and Medical Department etc., in implementing various developmental programmes. These departments worked together to extend public services, improve livelihood opportunities and addressing challenges in rural areas.

In this phase, 4,183 panchayats successfully uploaded their filled booklets on the portal with 108 remaining failed to upload. Despite this, the phase demonstrated a continuous effort to strengthen grassroots democracy, decentralized planning and inclusive governance (Deptt. of RD&PR, J&K, 2024).

Engagement of Government Officials in Back to Village (B2V) Programme

In the Back to Village (B2V) programme, over 25,000 government employees participated at all levels including 4,500 gazetted officers, who were directly deployed to the panchayats as Reporting officer (RO). They were affiliated to different departments of Jammu and Kashmir, which reflects the diverse and multi-sectoral approach in Back to Village (B2V) and its implementation at grassroot level. For example, in the Fourth phase of the B2V, officers from a total 43 departments were deployed as Reporting Officers (ROs). Among these departments, the School Education Department has the highest representation, accounting for 1,862 RO officers (43.40%). Following the School Education Department, from the Agriculture and Production Department 489 officers (11.40%).

The Higher Education Department had the third-largest participation, with 340 officers (7.93%) followed by the Public Works Department (PWD-R&B) at 260 officers (6.06%). The other key departments include the Jal Shakti Department (166 officer, 3.87%), Power Development Department (155 officers, 3.61%) and Department of Forest, Ecology and Environment (105 officers, 2.45%). This widespread departmental affiliation of officers, shows the strong focus of the government to the B2V programme, scale of execution of the programme and engagement of diverse field of expertise in its implementation.

Additionally, in the Back to Village (B2V) programme, the Reporting Officers were from varied services and designations, including from the top civil servants such as Secretary, Director, Collector; Academicians, such as Professor, Assistant Professor, Lecturer; Health Practitioner such as Doctors etc., who were deployed to the panchayats to lead the field visits. In the fourth phase of the Back to Village (B2V) programme, the most of the ROs were Lecturers, accounting for 21.35% of the total, followed by Senior Lecturer (8.9%), Assistant Professors (6.71%) and Assistant Engineers (5.38%). Other notable designations include Assistant Executive Engineers (4.87%) and Veterinary Assistant Surgeons (2.37%), including a significant presence of technical and professional roles. Additionally, Deputy Director, Under Secretary, Director and Executive Engineer were also engaged as reporting officers. The presence of Secretaries and Directors shows the crucial role of ROs in B2V programme and policy decisions of B2V.

Count of DESIGNATION_Processed_Final
BY DEPARTMENT

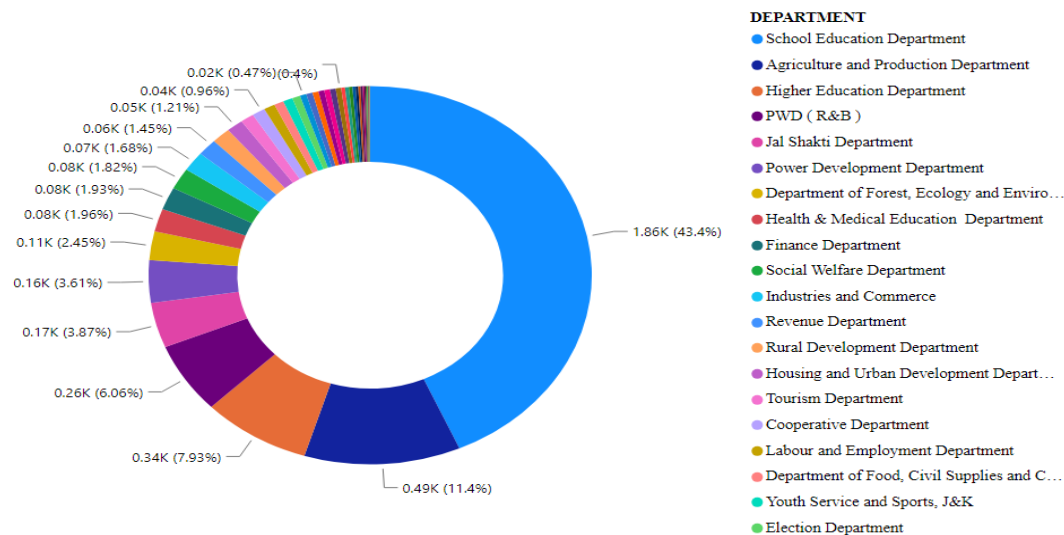


Figure 3: Department-wise number and percentage share (%) of Reporting Officer (RO) engaged in B2V4 Programme

Source: Data compiled from <https://jkpanchayat.jk.gov.in/b2v4.php>

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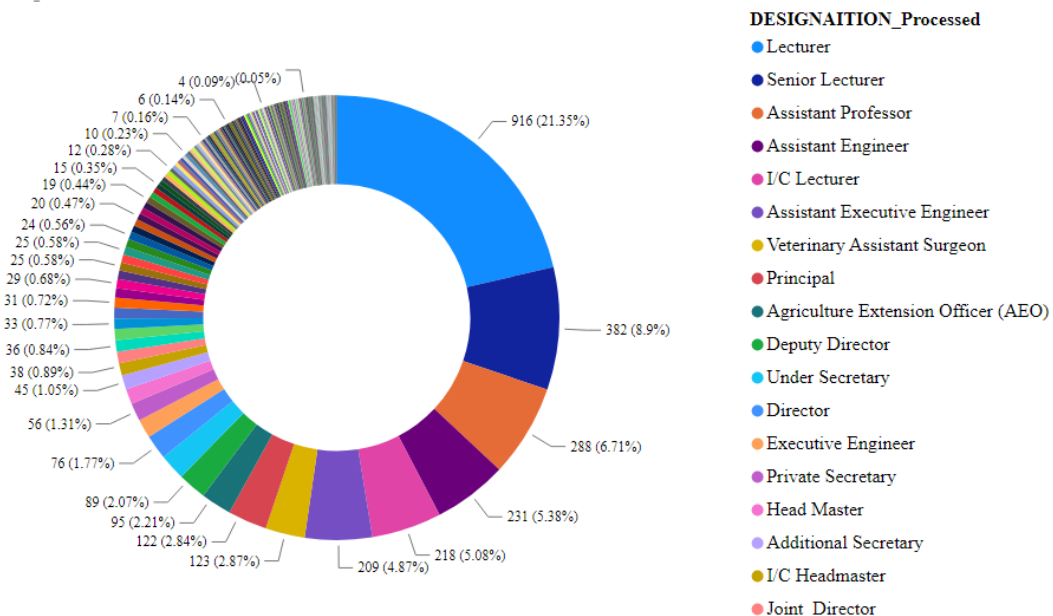


Figure 4: Designation-wise number and percentage share (%) of Reporting Officers (RO) engaged in B2V4 Programme

Source: Data compiled from <https://jkpanchayat.jk.gov.in/b2v4.php>

The engagement of officers from widespread departments and designations, improved the effectiveness of B2V programme by ensuring integrated efforts and follow-up mechanisms, improving the coordination and facilitating the resource allocation.

Community Participation

The Back to Village (B2V) programme facilitated the direct community participation in planning and development of panchayats in Jammu and Kashmir (Singh & Somani, 2024, p. 103). It ensured direct interaction between government officials and panchayat residents, to gather direct response and real-time feedback from the residents (Gireesan K., 2022). The Reporting Officers directed to visit the allocated Panchayat, reside in the Panchayat for specific period, attend meeting with panchayat resident and frontier officers with programme booklet to record and report public response. Additionally, the community participation to B2V programme facilitated the following activities in panchayats development planning:

- Interactive session between officials and local residents to understand the needs and aspirations of villagers.
- Identification of developmental priorities as per the aspirations and need of the local residents.
- Providing platform and opportunities to marginalised section of society to directly participate in village planning to ensure inclusivity in policy process.
- Recoding public feedback to transparency and effectiveness of implemented project.
- To prepare action plan for Panchayat according to need and aspiration of the residents of the Panchayat.

CONCLUSION

The Back to Village (B2V) programme was a significant step towards the decentralized planning and doorstep governance in Jammu and Kashmir, ensuring that governmental policy decisions should be evidence based and aligned with the needs of rural communities. The involvement of officers, ranging from Secretary, Director, Professor to Lecturer, facilitated multiple fields of expertise to provide ground level engagement, administrative oversights and policy direction. In the initial phase, the programme focused on data collection and identifying the local challenges, while the later phases shifted their focus towards policy implementation, infrastructural improvements and ensuring the sustainability of developmental initiatives. From the detailed analysis of the policy document and reports on Back to Village (B2V) programme, following observations have been drawn about the B2V programme:

- The B2V programme aimed at rural development in Jammu and Kashmir through doorstep governance and decentralized governance. It facilitated doorstep service delivery.
- It improved the Public connect through direct community participation in rural planning and engagement of government officials, elected representatives and panchayat residents.
- The programme adopted holistic approach and covered all panchayats of Jammu and Kashmir, to assess local issues, collect feedback and ensure doorstep delivery of government schemes.
- The 4th and 5th phases of the programme, apart from the decentralized planning and governance, focused on deliverable targets set by the various governmental departments in panchayats.
- The programme contributed to greater accountability, transparency and efficiency in rural governance of Jammu and Kashmir. By integrating government officers at grassroot decision making or real time feedback, this programme enhanced the grassroot participation. In this way, the Back to Village programme sets a model for inclusive governance, reinforcing the governmental policies for the development at the doorstep and sustainable rural development.

Hence, the B2V programme has played a vital role in ensuring accountability and citizen-driven rural development in Jammu and Kashmir. These advancements in rural governance have further strengthened the rural governance in Jammu and Kashmir in terms of capacity building, financial devolution, community engagement, decentralized

planning and doorstep service delivery. If these efforts continue to evolve, they could further strengthen inclusive rural good governance in the region.

AUTHOR DECLARATIONS

CRedit author statement / Authors Contribution

Rouchi Chaudhary: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Project Administration, Supervision, Methodology, Review and Editing.

Ajay Kumar Singh: Feedback and Review.

Ratnesh Singh: Literature review, Methodology, Software, Analysis, Draft preparation, Editing.

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