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Issue Brief

Vibrant Village Programme: A Focussed Attempt to Develop Border Areas?

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S*ummary*

The Vibrant Village Programme is a centrally sponsored programme launched by the Government of India in 2023 to develop selected villages along India's northern borders comprehensively. Similar programmes such as the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) have suffered due to meagre financial resources, ineffective monitoring of projects and uncooperative state governments.

In the Union Budget announced on 21 July 2024, the Government of India allocated Rs 1,050 crores for the Vibrant Village Programme (VVP) for the financial year 2024–25. The VVP, which was announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her Budget Speech on 1 February 2022,¹ is a centrally sponsored scheme aimed at developing remote villages along the northern borders by improving road and other infrastructure in these far-flung areas. The programme envisages comprehensive development of the border villages including constructing roads and houses, provisioning for decentralised renewable energy, television and telecom connectivity, promotion of tourism and culture, skill development and entrepreneurship, development of societies for employment generation, so on and so forth.² The objective is to provide basic amenities to the border residents as well as generate economic opportunities so that they do not feel left out of the ‘development gains’ and migrate out of these remote areas.

For accomplishing these tasks, the government had proposed an outlay of Rs 4,800 crores to be spent over five years (2022–23 to 2025–26). Of the earmarked amount, Rs 2,500 crores will be spent exclusively on building roads and the rest will be spent on other infrastructure. Accordingly, on 15 February 2023, the union government approved the VVP, under which, 2,967 villages of 19 districts in four states and one union territory adjacent to the India–China border are to be comprehensively developed.

The programme will be implemented in three phases with 662 border villages to be developed on a priority basis in the first phase. Of these 652 villages, maximum number of villages (445) are in Arunachal Pradesh, followed by Himachal Pradesh (75), Uttarakhand (51), Sikkim (46) and Ladakh (35).³ In addition to the projects under the VVP, the union government has instructed that all other ongoing centrally sponsored schemes aimed at providing health, education, sanitation, etc., should be dovetailed and implemented so that resources for upgrading socio-economic services in these villages are augmented. On 10 April 2023, the VVP was inaugurated in Kibithoo, a border village in Arunachal Pradesh.⁴

Reasons for launching the VVP

While development of border areas has been the focus for the government since long, the spur for initiating the VVP can be attributed to the clashes between the Indian and the Chinese armies in June 2020 in the Ladakh sector. India’s border areas,

¹ Nirmala Sitharaman, [Budget 2022-2023](#), 1 February, 2022, p. 10.

² [Unstarred Question No. 3251: Budgetary Allocations for Vibrant Villages Programme](#), Rajya Sabha, 29 March 2023.

³ Ibid.

⁴ [“Union Home Minister and Minister of Cooperation, Shri Amit Shah launches the ‘Vibrant Villages Programme’ at Kibithoo”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 10 April 2023.

especially the India–China border areas, are characterised by poor road connectivity. As a result, civil administration cannot reach these areas and provide basic amenities and services to the border residents. Absence of employment opportunities and basic services compel the border population to out-migrate to cities and towns in the mainland in search of a better life.

Although difficult terrain and adverse climate do hinder construction and maintenance of road infrastructure in the remote areas, a long-standing but an implicit policy of leaving the border areas devoid of road networks is also responsible for the sad state of the border areas, especially along India–China border. The explanation forwarded for implementing such as policy was that absence of transportation networks coupled with difficult terrain would impede the rapid movement of an invading army into the country’s hinterland. Absence of villages in the border area will further deprive the enemy of local intelligence and logistics crucial for their advancement. In hindsight, this policy of leaving the border areas underdeveloped and depopulated did more harm than good to the country. Consequently, this policy was jettisoned by mid-2000s.

It is now increasingly recognised that the border population is a strategic asset to the country as they perform several roles that contribute towards better security of India’s international borders. To begin with, border communities who reside in the remote areas are an excellent source of information about the local environment through personal observations as well as from their networks of families and friends, some of whom may reside on the other side of the international border. This knowledge, if properly tapped, can help the law enforcement agencies develop a comprehensive picture of the border areas and better combat anti-nationals and criminals’ activities.

Second, the border communities can serve as an informal layer of surveillance. The border residents, especially the nomads, who follow the livestock routes and wander in the uninhabited border areas, have good observation capabilities and can warn the authorities of any border transgression. As a matter of fact, it is well-known that the infiltration by the Pakistani army in the Kargil sector was first detected and reported by a local shepherd Tashi Namgyal on 3 May 1999, who was searching for his missing yak.

Third, the border communities provide logistical support to the border guarding forces and military. In far-off border areas, border patrolling often involves travelling for weeks, maybe months. Villages located in these remote areas do provide food and shelter to the patrolling parties. This allows the border guards not only to travel light but also to hold interactions with the villagers who provide important information to the personnel. Existence of villages in the remote areas also allows the border guarding forces to recruit locals as porters, guides, as well as workers for building strategic infrastructure in these areas.

Last but not least, existence of border villages reinforces India’s claim on disputed areas. Settled population in the border areas are extremely important for India to reinforce its claim on these areas, especially along the India–China border. This fact can be corroborated by Article 7 of the ‘Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for Settlement of India-China Boundary Question’, which India and China signed in April 2005. The Article stipulates that ‘the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas’.⁵ This could be translated to mean that settled population shall not be disturbed when considering realignment of the border between India and China. Thus, the presence of people in the border areas is essential to safeguard the country against any threats.

China has been focussing on targeted development of its border areas for long. In 2017, China announced plans to build hundreds of villages with modern infrastructure to develop the border areas. In fact, President Xi Jinping told the herdsmen from a Tibetan settlement to set down roots in the border areas ‘like galsang flowers’ to safeguard Chinese territory and focus on developing their hometown.⁶ Between 2018 and 2022, China reportedly built 624 ‘well-off’ villages (Xiaokang)⁷ and is continuously expanding and upgrading them.

These border villages typically have 50–100 houses and are populated by local villagers, people from the mainland and People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers. Some of these villages are newly built and isolated but are self-sufficient. These villages have all the basic amenities and boast of dual-use infrastructure.⁸ In fact, the Xiaokang demonstrate Chinese strategy of leveraging civilian villages to support the military in the border areas.⁹ In this context, the VVP is often touted as India’s response to China’s ‘well-off villages’ along the borders with India.

Previous efforts to develop border villages

Development of border areas gained salience in the aftermath of the Sikh militancy in Punjab. The increased militant attacks on border villages had driven border residents away, thus not only depopulating the border areas but also enveloping them in fear and economic depression. The Union government started the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) in 1986–87 along its western border as a special government intervention for providing basic amenities and services to the border population to prevent their exodus as well as provide a sense of security. Over

⁵ [“Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi, 11 April 2005.

⁶ [“China: Xi Jinping Tells Tibetan Herdsmen to Settle Down Near India Border”](#), *The Economic Times*, 29 October 2019.

⁷ [“Official: Quality of Life in Tibet Improves”](#), *The People’s Daily Online*, 18 January 2023.

⁸ Jennifer Jun and Brian Hart, [“China is Upgrading Dual-Use Villages along Its Disputed Indian Border”](#), *China Power-CSIS*, 16 May 2024.

⁹ Ibid.

the next decade, this programme was extended to other borders of the country to address the infrastructural requirements of the people living in these far-flung areas. By the mid-2000s, as the country was growing economically, the need to also develop the border areas was gradually felt by the policymakers in New Delhi.¹⁰

Consequently, the Union government advised the State governments to comprehensively develop one village as a model village under the BADP since 2005–06.¹¹ A determined effort to develop smart/model villages under the BADP was undertaken in 2015.¹² The scheme stipulated that those villages adjoining the border and identified as ‘strategic’ by the border guarding forces and endorsed by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) should be developed on priority.¹³ Accordingly, these strategic villages, which have significant bearing on national security will be provided with connectivity (road and telecommunication), basic amenities as well as avenues for income generation. The primary aim was to retain the border population by ensuring their socio-economic well-being.¹⁴

Under the scheme, a border village with a fairly large population with few surrounding villages was to be thoroughly developed so that over time, it develops into an economically thriving place. The growth centre with the model village as a nucleus was to provide job opportunities not only to its residents but also for the residents of the surrounding villages.¹⁵ It was envisaged that this will not only help prevent out-migration of border residents but also lead to adequately populating the border areas. Furthermore, keeping in mind the urgent need to develop border areas along the India–China border, the government stressed the need to give priority to the development of the ‘strategic villages’ abutting the northern borders. It also assigned 10 per cent additional funds from the allocated BADP funds to the states and union territory along this border for taking up specific developmental projects.¹⁶

The MHA stipulated that by 2022, one or two model villages should be developed in each border district of the country. It further stated that Perspective and Annual Plans should be formulated for the overall development of the ‘strategic villages’. Accordingly, 61 model villages along all the land borders of the country were proposed to be developed with a financial allocation of Rs 2 crores per village.¹⁷

¹⁰ [109th Report on Demands for Grants 2004–05 of Ministry of Home Affairs](#), Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs, presented to the Rajya Sabha, 23 August 2004, p. 29.

¹¹ *Border Area Development Programme: Report of the Task Force*, New Delhi, Planning Commission, 2007, p. 9.

¹² “Modified Guidelines of the Border Area Development Programme (BADP), June 2015”, Department of Border Management, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 29 June 2015, p. 16.

¹³ [“Border Area Development Programme \(BADP\): Modified Guidelines \(June 2015\)”](#), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi, 2015.

¹⁴ [“Border Areas Development Programme”](#), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2022.

¹⁵ [“Model Village”](#), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 3 February 2017.

¹⁶ [“New Guidelines of Border Area Development Programme \(BADP\) – 2020”](#), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, March 2020.

¹⁷ *Border Area Development Programme: Report of the Task Force*, no. 11.

Implementation of the VVP: Potential Challenges

Potential challenges to the implementation of the VVP can be ascertained by assessing the performance of the Model/Smart Village scheme under the BADP. The effectiveness of the BADP in ameliorating the living conditions of border people has been below par. One of the major reasons for its poor performance is inadequate fund allocation. In order to compensate for less available resources, state governments are advised to pool in resources under various centrally sponsored schemes. However, the sum total of projects specified under the BADP is so diverse in their nature and scope that it dilutes the government’s efforts to develop border villages in a focussed manner. Moreover, the Union government fails to timely or fully release funds to the states because either faulty schemes are proposed by states or because of untimely submission of approved lists of projects or delayed submission of utilisation certificates by the states concerned.¹⁸

The half-hearted efforts by the state governments to implement the BADP further compound the problem. The funds which are received by the state governments under the BADP are, most often than not, utilised in areas other than the border areas. For example, it is observed that many state governments do not conduct the baseline survey of border villages to ascertain the infrastructural requirements of the border villages or prepare the Annual and Perspective Plans necessary to create required infrastructure.¹⁹ Consequently, schemes which are not required are implemented in the designated border villages or schemes are randomly implemented in non-strategic villages.²⁰ Moreover, various schemes under the programme are given unequal importance. For instance, Meghalaya allocated less funds for health, education, agriculture and social sector and more funds for sports activities, thus violating the BADP guidelines.²¹

The effectiveness of the BADP is further marred by the vagueness of criteria for its implementation. One such criterion is that the villages situated within 0 to 10 km should be developed first and once these villages are ‘saturated’ with socio-economic infrastructure, then only the next batch of villages can be developed. The problem faced by implementing agencies to follow these criteria is that areas approaching these villages near the borders do not have the road connectivity required to transport construction and other material. As a result, developmental works cannot be carried out satisfactorily in the remote villages. What is required is that the areas

¹⁸ [“Evaluation Study on Border Areas Development Programme BADP”](#), PEO Report No. 229, NITI Aayog, New Delhi, 2015, pp. 6, 18.

¹⁹ [“Report No. 6 of 2022 Panchayati Raj Institutions of Government of Rajasthan”](#), Comptroller and Auditor General of India, 2018, pp. 22–24. Also see, [“Report No 2 of 2018 Social Economic General Revenue And Economic \(PSUs\) Sectors Government of Arunachal Pradesh”](#), Comptroller and Auditor General of India, 2018, p. 61.

²⁰ [“Report No3 of 2018 - Social Economic General and Economic PSUs Sectors Government of Meghalaya”](#), Comptroller and Auditor General of India, 2018, p. 56.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

that lead to the border villages should be developed first so that proper connectivity could be established between the hinterland and the border areas. Similarly, principles for declaring a village being ‘saturated’ with infrastructure is not defined. The decision to declare a village being ‘saturated’ is left to the discretion of the district magistrate.

Furthermore, state governments hardly carry out proper inspection of the work completed under the BADP. In fact, nearly 40 per cent of the states do not have a proper system for inspection and monitoring of BADP work.²² Organisations concerned such as the panchayats, border guarding forces and other grassroots agencies do not have the mandate to either monitor the progress or inspect the completed projects. Dearth of manpower and inadequate qualification of the staff in the district administration further hamper the implementation as well as monitoring process. Moreover, once the social infrastructure such as schools, colleges, dispensaries, hospitals, etc., are created, state governments struggle to recruit the required manpower to make them functional.

A critical factor which has robbed the BADP of its effectiveness is that local people and villagers, who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of the projects, are hardly consulted when schemes under the BADP are formulated. They are also kept away during the implementation and monitoring processes of these projects. In fact, the district administration does not make any efforts to educate the villagers about the BADP and all decisions regarding the projects to be executed are taken at the higher levels. Absence of local participation enables faulty schemes to be implemented and encourages corruption where in the funds are either siphoned off by corrupt bureaucrats and politicians or utilised in schemes outside the border areas, thus perpetuating the developmental gap in the border areas.

Conclusion

The VVP is a well-intentioned developmental scheme launched to mitigate the developmental gaps exclusively along India’s northern border in order to arrest the out-migration of border residents. For this purpose, funds have been sanctioned for developing strategic villages as well as improving road connectivity along the remote border areas. However, given the record of the Model/Smart Village scheme, it is to be seen how successfully the VVP is implemented. The union government should take into account the shortcomings of the BADP and address them effectively, so that the VVP can be implemented efficiently.

²² [“Report No. 6 of 2022 Panchayati Raj Institutions of Government of Rajasthan”](#), no. 19, pp. 63–64.

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