

Bal Mitra Gram (Child-Friendly Village): Promoting Child-centric Village Development

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INTERNATIONALLY ACCLAIMED child rights activist and first India-born Nobel Peace Laureate, Mr. Kailash Satyarthi, has been at the forefront of several global movements to end child slavery and exploitation since 1980. Leaving behind a career as an Electrical Engineer, he walked the untraveled path and founded *Bachpan Bachao Andolan* (Save the Childhood Movement) to rescue children and their families from the shackles of slavery and pave the way for their reintegration into mainstream society. Under his aegis, the movement till date has rescued over 90,000 children from the scourge of bondage, trafficking and exploitative labor in India. His unique intervention “Child-Friendly Villages” keeps around 75,000 children away from child labor every day. The model ensures that 50,000 children are retained in schools, and that 25,000 girls are kept away from child marriage. His unrelenting efforts of forty years to free children from exploitation contributed to the decline in the global number of child laborers from 246 million to 152 million. In 2014, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his fight against the exploitation of children and young people and their right to education. His untiring efforts continue to play a pivotal role across the globe in making the world a better place for children. He envisions a world where every child is free, safe, healthy, educated, free from all forms of exploitation and is able to realize his/her true potential.

Mr. Satyarthi founded Kailash Satyarthi Children’s Foundation (KSCF) in 2004. Through concerted and sustained actions, KSCF demonstrated that a child-friendly society can be achieved through direct and continued grassroots-level intervention. KSCF continues to fight against all kinds of child rights violation, including child labor, child trafficking and child sexual abuse.

Evolution of *Bal Mitra Gram*/Child-friendly Village

Mr. Satyarthi conceptualized *Bal Mitra Gram* (BMG) or Child-friendly Village (CFV) sometime in 2001. Through the BMG program, he aimed to eradicate child slavery and create a child-friendly world. Mr. Satyarthi adopted multi-pronged strategies that included such tactics as raid and rescue operations to liberate children in servitude, institutional care for rehabilitation, building consumer awareness, ethical trade practices, policy interventions and mass mobilization (physical marches, campaigns,) which have yielded long-lasting results.

The idea of BMG resulted from the experience of rescuing and safeguarding child bonded laborers for twenty years. The idea is to make children become aware of the exploitative nature of child labor, to emancipate them from any form of exploitation, build self-reliance, and kindle the desire for education so as to eliminate the curse of child labor. For this to become a reality, the active participation and cooperation of family, society and village-level local administration are essential.

The concept of BMG was first implemented in Sothana village in Papri Panchayat of Jaipur district, Rajasthan state. The intervention was subsequently expanded to other villages in Rajasthan state, which were well-known for child labor, child marriage, and reduced education rate of girls. Later, the concept of BMG was extended to other states prone to exploitation of children such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Since 2001, five hundred forty BMGs have been created. Virat Nagar Block of Jaipur district is now 100 percent child labor free, and the children are attending school. The mica mining villages in Bihar and Jharkhand states are another noteworthy places of intervention where the program has rescued the children from the worst forms of child-labor mining. Over the course of the period, the BMG model has been replicated in Ghana, Nepal and Uganda through civil society partners on account of its effectiveness in changing the lives of the children.

BMG and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

BMG supplements the efforts of countries in achieving the 2030 goal of Sustainable Development and addresses SDG-1 (No poverty), SDG-2 (Zero hunger), SDG-3 (Good health and well-being), SDG-4 (Quality educa-

tion), SDG-5 (Gender equality), SDG-6 (Clean water and sanitation), SDG-8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG-8.7 (End modern slavery, trafficking and child labor), SDG-10 (Reducing inequalities), SDG-11 (Sustainable cities & communities) and SDG-16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). (see Figure 1)

Figure 1



BMG – Basic Components

BMG is a social movement geared towards creating an ecosystem in villages where the rights of children are protected. A BMG can consist of a village or a cluster of villages with about one hundred twenty to one hundred fifty households, each household having five to six members, and around two hundred to two hundred fifty children.

Each BMG adheres to the following rules:

- All child laborers are withdrawn from work;
- All children are enrolled in and attending school;
- Children's participation in democratic decision-making (children form a *Bal Panchayat* [an elected Children's Village Council]) is ensured;
- The *Bal Panchayat* is officially recognized by the *Gram Panchayat* (elected Adult Village Council) to ensure its comprehensive development;

- Vulnerable communities including women and youth, marginalized sections of society and the minorities are empowered leading to over-all village and school development.

The members and leaders of BMG have the following tasks:

1. Take action to contain social evils such as trafficking of children, early and forced marriages, violence against children;
2. Organize village meetings and ensure participation of members;
3. Raise awareness on basic human rights with a focus on sexual and reproductive health;
4. Raise concerns with local governments on development issues;
5. Establish information centers;
6. Develop alternative livelihood programs;
7. Organize legal awareness, health and hygiene drives.

Families in BMGs have awareness about the importance of education and they are capable of guiding their children's school education, made aware of government socio-economic welfare schemes, and supported in developing attitudinal and mind-set change.

Since its formation in 2001 five hundred forty villages have been converted into BMGs spread over six states (Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka).

BMG's Theory of Change

A BMG is guided through a process of change and empowerment and becomes self-reliant in resolving issues of protection, education, health and



BMG's Theory of Change

development for all children. A BMG builds a safety net around the child, as depicted in the diagram below:

As part of the process of conversion of a village into a BMG, the following change processes are implemented in the village.

1. Strong child protection mechanism
 - Village Child Protection Committees under Integrated Child Protection Scheme are formed and strengthened.
 - Stakeholder groups of *Bal Panchayat* (women, youth and influential leaders, community members) are formed and work as a vigilant group to curb child exploitation.
 - Intensive awareness generation for attitudinal change of people is carried out on a regular basis.
2. Access to quality education
 - Annual enrolment drive, home visits, counselling of parents and communities are done so that children get enrolled in school and also attend it regularly.
 - School Management Committees (SMCs), which monitor the functioning of schools and ensure that teachers are accountable, are strengthened and their members are sensitized about their roles.



School Management Committee (SMC) training.

- School environment is enhanced through improvement in mid-day meal, drinking water, availability of functional toilets, activities, neutralizing gender and caste-based discrimination and sensitizing teachers on gender issues.
 - Libraries are established, classroom is made print-rich (texts and photos posted on the classroom walls) and facilities are created for sports activities, etc.
3. Child participation and leadership
 - Child participation is emphasized, leadership is groomed, democratic values are promoted, improvement of school education and other village-related issues are taken up with the involvement of *Gram Panchayat*.
 4. Empowering communities
 - Capacities of stakeholders are enhanced by making them aware of their rights.



Accessing to government welfare schemes.

Children are encouraged to access their rights and entitlements by writing letters, applications and holding the *panchayat* accountable.

5. Access to health and nutrition
 - The Integrated Child Development Scheme of India, being implemented for health, nutrition, and pre-school education of children up to six years, is accessed.

In BMG, steps are taken to ensure the following:

- Ensure proper functioning of the scheme for early child care;
- Cater to the requirement of immunization and nutritional needs of children and expecting women;
- Organize health awareness camps, hold activities for behavioral change about safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene practices in the community specially targeting adolescent girls and women.

Activities

- a. Improved enrollment and attendance of children in schools
1. Annual School Enrolment Drive - This activity is clubbed with promoting awareness generation about girl-child education. A list of all newly eligible children for the first year of schooling along with out-of-school children is prepared. An awareness drive comprising children, *panchayat* members, SMC members, teachers and stakeholder groups is organized. A group of people walk through the streets of the village raising slogans and visiting all households having eligible child for enrolment or out-of-school. All such chil-



Promoting girl child education through provision of bicycles to make travel easy.



Enrollment drive campaign (School Chalo Abhiyan).

dren and their parents are taken along and the rally culminates at the school. The list of children to be enrolled is handed over to the teachers and other formalities are completed the next day.

2. Improving School Environment - To ensure retention of children's attendance, the improvement of school infrastructure and environment is done by strengthening SMCs, establishing libraries, making print-rich classrooms, conducting co-curricular activities, parents-teachers meetings, community seminars, etc.

3. Education, Village Development, Inclusion - The immense change the BMG program can bring about is explained by the example of transformation of Golgo village in Koderma. Golgo village comes under Domchach block of Koderma district in Jharkhand state. Surrounded by dense forest, hills and mica mining, the village comprise of thirty-five households with approximately seventy children. Mica mining is the only source of income for the villagers. Before the BMG intervention, parents were forced to engage their children in work due to unemployment and extreme poverty. There was not a single proper house (one that would be enough to protect them from rain, sunshine, etc.) in the village. But after BMG intervention, three proper houses with minimum standards of protection from rain and sun were constructed and sixteen are under construction through Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana [Urban] (PMAY) scheme. There was no proper road connectivity to the village and during the monsoons the connectivity was much worse. KSCF activists along with villagers held meetings with officials as well as local Members of Parliament to demand for road construction for their village.



Children conducting meetings with stakeholders (adults, women's group, youth and others).

Electricity was another major concern of the village as it had been two years since the electric pillars were installed, but electricity connections have not been provided. *Bal Panchayat* took up the issue and started following up with the officials. BMG raised this issue with government officials and in forums and thus helped Golgo BMG get electricity facility. There was no adequate drinking water facility in Golgo as the only sources of water in the village were two hand pumps and two wells. In addition, the water of hand pumps was not drinkable and the water of wells was contaminated. The villagers met with officials and resulted in repairing of hand pumps and deepening of existing pond.



Repairing handpumps by the community to ensure safe drinking water supply.

Education had no importance in the lives of people in the village, particularly for girls. There was only one primary school and the school had only two teachers, one regular and one contractual. The headmaster, who resided seven kilometers away from the village, rarely came to the school. Villagers also did not encourage their children to go to the school after passing 5th grade. Most of the children used to drop out from school and only few boys went

for the middle school at Rupandih for further study. After KSCF and BMG intervention, parents sent their children to school. Children attended school regularly and parents also started taking interest in their studies. Apart from the above, the school did not have a proper toilet, and SMC was non-functional. Due to BMG activities, the school now has electricity, has a separate toilet for boys and girls and the SMC now meets regularly. The school has also been provided with five electric fans, four water jars and benches for the students in school.

b. Bal Panchayat (Children's Council) : Promoting Democratic Child Participation

Children in a BMG form a *Bal Panchayat*, participate in awareness rallies and campaigns on social evils such as child marriage, alcoholism, and important issues such as health, hygiene, environment and community development. They attend school, take part in life-skills training, develop programs for extra-curricular activities, and participate in village activities. A *Bal Panchayat* is officially recognized by the *Gram Panchayat*.

Through the *Bal Panchayats*, children participate in the decision-making process in the village.



The elected representatives of National Children's Council (*Bal Panchayat*)



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The Election Process of *Bal Panchayat*.

The *Bal Panchayat* plays a vital role in raising children's issues such as protection of every child, convincing parents and community members about ensuring child rights.

The process of forming a *Bal Panchayat* inculcates the values of democracy, participation, leadership and healthy competition among the children and development of healthy competition skills.

The case of BMG Mangala *Panchayat* (Karnataka state) illustrates this point. The primary school of BMG Mangala *Panchayat* was only till 5th standard. Beyond 5th standard, children had to travel for more than twelve kilometers to attend school. The *Bal Panchayat* decided to raise this concern at the *Gram Panchayat* meeting. They also gathered support from community members, teachers and other stakeholder groups. *Gram Panchayat* raised the issue in one of the public hearings held by Karnataka State Commission for Protection of Child Rights. The matter was taken cognizance of immediately and within a period of two months a new building for the higher primary school was constructed in BMG Mangala.

Results: Emerging Changemakers

Fifteen year-old Ankita from BMG Bhilay, Ganj Basoda (Madhya Pradesh state) finished higher secondary school and wanted to pursue education to become a teacher. Owing to her parents' decision of not sending her to school, she was a drop-out. But she wanted to study. She got in touch with the local Community Social Worker and got herself enrolled in a school in her village. This is symbolic of the empowerment process the girls in her village have gone through as they are now not only voicing their opinions but vehemently shattering the set structures of the society.

Payal Jangid, thirteen years old, lives in BMG Hinsla village, Rajasthan state. In village Hinsla, all the children are free from exploitation and are enrolled in primary school. Growing up, Payal witnessed child labor and other exploitations against children around her. Through her participation in the *Bal Panchayat* as *Bal Pradhan* (President) of the village, she has not just been actively involved in helping the children but also women twice her age.

Due to the BMG program there has been a positive change in the gender roles within many households of the village and women have now started voicing their opinions.

Payal observes:

Until and unless children themselves realize that they have some rights, they won't feel unyoked. A child must have some agency which enables her/him to decide.

She has also taken out rallies and protests to engage women's groups and youth forums of her village regarding ill-practices, namely *Ghunghat*



Payal receiving the Goalkeepers Global Goals Award in New York.

Pratha (wearing of veil by women), child marriage and other rituals that perpetuate patriarchy.

After four years of work at her BMG in Hinsla, Payal was given the Changemaker Award at the 2019 Goalkeepers Global Goals Changemaker Awards in New York.¹

Thirteen-year old Lalita Duhariya from a village in Alwar district of Rajasthan is another classic example of how determined children in BMG have led the battle against gender and caste prejudices that have bedeviled India for centuries.

Lalita leads from the front to demolish various prejudices and works towards a fairer and more egalitarian society. Since her childhood, Lalita had protested against both caste and gender discrimination practiced in her village and nearby areas. She became a member of the *Bal Panchayat* and started fighting against caste discrimination in her school. She persuaded children attending the school to share their meals with each other without bothering about caste. She persuaded her fellow school children to share meals cooked by a lower caste lady. Earlier, parents of upper caste children had ordered them not to eat those meals. But all children soon started eating together. A major victory for her came during the festival *Makar Sankranti*. She led a team of *Bal Panchayat* members and encouraged all villagers to share the festivities and the meals together. These efforts have gone a long way in reducing caste prejudice in her village. Children and villagers now do not discriminate people. They speak to each other in a group and share their

issues or future development practices. They now say “it’s our village” from “it’s our caste.”

Awards and Accolades

The BMG program and its child leaders have received global recognition for their outstanding contributions to promote child rights:

- Japanese Award for Most Innovative Development Project by Global Development Network in 2010;
- Miss Razia Sultan, child leader from Meerut - first recipient of the United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education’s Youth Courage Award for Education in 2013;
- Miss Payal Jangid, child leader from a BMG in Rajasthan – received the Goalkeepers Global Goals Changemaker Award along with Honorable Prime Minister of India in 2019 for transforming her village by the elimination of child labor, child marriage and promotion of education of girls;



Neeraj Murmu winner of Diana Award 2020.

- Miss Champa Kumari, a former child laborer and child leader from BMG in Jharkhand state - received the Diana Award 2019 for Young People and was honored by Honorable Governor of Jharkhand state, Draupadi Murmu, for her work in preventing child labor in mica mining.

- Mr Neeraj Murmu, former child laborer and youth group leader in a BMG in Jharkhand state - received the Diana Award 2020 for Young People for championing the cause of education.

Reflections and Plans

The concept of BMG directly addresses the multi-dimensional problems that create and maintain child labor. It attacks the root causes to ensure sustainability of the eradication of child labor. Not only does this approach aim to withdraw children from work and enhance the quality of education, but

it also aims to ensure a holistic development of Indian villages to create a child-friendly society. BMGs emphasize child participation, community mobilization, promotion of education, victim's/survivor's empowerment, gender equality and awareness on gender issues, and also facilitate the convergence and access of various government schemes, which leads to long-term sustainability of the initiatives by creating various structures at the community level through community mobilization.

The concept of BMG has received due recognition across the country and different state governments have come forward to collaborate with KSCF to replicate the model. As part of scaling up process, KSCF and the Government of Jharkhand state signed a Memorandum of Understanding for promoting Child Labor Free MICA Region in a span of five years. This is currently under execution phase. Similar opportunities exist. The key challenge is mobilizing of resources to achieve the goal.

We have many like-minded organizations, individuals and professionals who had walked along with us in difficult situations facing challenges, obstacles, etc. Today we feel very proud in looking at our changemakers leading the way forward.

Endnote

¹ Sasha R., "17-year old Payal Jangid becomes first Indian to win Goalkeepers Global Goals Changemaker Award," *Her Story*, 25 September 2019, <https://yourstory.com/herstory/2019/09/gates-foundation-goalkeepers-changemaker-award-payal-jangid-india>.