

BALGRAN: SOLVING ISSUES OF AN NGO IN JAMMU & KASHMIR

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Case Study

Balgran, a not-for-profit non-governmental voluntary organization was established in 1975 at Channi Rama, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), India to provide 'family home' to destitute, orphan, abandoned and socially handicapped children enabling them to lead an independent and secure life. Balgran, a local dialect Dogri word, meaning "children's village", was registered with Registrar of Societies J&K government.

First dormitory with mess for the children was inaugurated on 24th April 1978. Since then, Balgran has expanded its services for children in need at a rapid pace including Bal Bharti public school, healthcare centre, vocational training and a computer centre. By January 2019, Balgran had served 2,542 children in need and had a donor base of 1,682 including both, who donate in-kind and in monetary terms.

However, Balgran being a not-for-profit voluntary organization operating in the conflict-prone state of J&K was experiencing several issues. It was facing difficulties in retaining the voluntary staff as they left the organization after having served for a short period without any prior notification once they found a rewarding alternative. NGOs operating in a conflict-prone state like Jammu and Kashmir face unique challenges, especially with respect to legitimacy. Prevalence of distrust among potential donors, wherein NGOs and similar organizations were looked upon as hawala front for militants, was one such unique challenge. Mr. A.K. Khajuria, President of Balgran, was concerned about these issues and also made a few failed attempts at resolving them. Finally, in February 2019, he decided to involve all the members of the governing body to resolve the issues Balgran had been facing.

ABOUT BALGRAN

"In Balgran, a child can find love and security under the care of Maa (mother-warden). They call each other bhau (brother) and behen (sister). They refer to me as Dada (grandfather)."

A.K Khajuria (President)

Mr. Khajuria, President of Balgran was a senior citizen and a resident of Jammu city. After completing his engineering in 1980, he initiated as a volunteer at Balgran when he was just 22 years old. His drive to serve the underprivileged and children, in particular, was evident from the fact that he consistently remained associated with an NGO like Balgran. He observed that the insurgency in the state had destroyed the emotional and psychological well-being of children especially those who were direct or indirect victims of the armed conflict. He also believed that the youth is most affected in areas prone to armed conflict, hence, the voluntary sector must pitch in to empower them. He felt a strong sense of emotional connect with Balgran as organizational aims were in congruence with his personal goals related to societal development. While designing solutions to the challenges faced, Mr. Khajuria considered the recommendations and guidance extended by Mr. Vinod Kumar Raina, Secretary of Balgran. Mr. Raina was a retired state government official and an ardent supporter of child rights. He became associated with Balgran as a donor when he was serving in the forest department of J&K, however, his devotion to work for the youth encouraged him to offer his services as a Secretary after his retirement.

Balgran aimed at holistic development of a child through nurturing care, education, vocational training, health facilities and a family-like atmosphere. In January 2019, there were 140 children (see Exhibit 1) and 59 volunteers in Balgran. It started its operations in 1978 with a single dormitory along with a small mess on its ground floor serving nine children. By 2004, it had scaled up to seven dormitories, a separate mess, a school and a healthcare centre serving 83 children. The vocational and the computer centre were established in 2010 and 2014 respectively (see Exhibit 2). The healthcare centre, equipped with three isolation beds, catered to the children and volunteers in Balgran. In January 2019, Balgran had eight dormitories and two cottages to accommodate the children and a separate mess which provided breakfast, lunch, evening tea, snacks and dinner. Mother-warden was made in charge of each dormitory and cottage to counsel and address the needs of children. Bal Bharti Public school was equipped with a library and duly recognized by Jammu and Kashmir State board up to 10th grade. Vocational centre enabled children to learn tailoring, stitching, embroidery, candle making and they handcrafted various items such as shopping bags, aprons, woollen socks, gloves and candles which were exhibited on several occasions for sale.

Balgran supported the J&K government in framing policies related to abused children by facilitating the requisite first-hand information which could be beneficial in policy-making. A team of three state government officials were allowed to speak directly to the children about the conditions in which they lived before being inducted into Balgran. It was the responsibility of the members of the governing body to keep track of government schemes (central and state) in which the children qualify as beneficiaries, thus, registering them to avail the benefits of the government schemes.

GRAND CHALLENGES – PURPOSE OF BALGRAN

J&K, a conflict-ridden state in India, had been suffering from the time the armed insurgency broke out in 1989. Militancy, curfews, convoys of army trucks and the political battles around the insurgency has had a deep-rooted impact on the psychological and emotional well-being of residents of the state, including children. Save the children, a UK- based charity organization, conducted a study in 2014 which revealed that there are around 2,15,000 orphans in J&K. Out of these, 37 per cent lost one or both parents due to armed conflict¹. In fact, armed conflict is one of the major causes of orphanhood. In 2018, one lakh people lost their lives due to armed conflicts and correspondingly thousands of children entered orphanhood across the world².

The disturbed environment in J&K not only had a grave impact on the children but also raised legitimacy issues over time with regard to NGOs. Residents of the state viewed such organizations as funding intermediaries for militants. Local NGOs operating in other states did not encounter the challenges associated with legitimacy. Mr. Khajuria sought suggestions from Mr. Raina, however, no concrete or definitive solution could be arrived at, to tackle the issues related to legitimacy. Due to suspicion and mistrust among the public, Balgran also faced difficulties in raising funds through donations.

As per the National Family and Health Survey-4 (2015-16)³, overall 5% of children under 18 years of age were orphans. As per a study conducted by SOS Children villages India, there were 20 million orphans in India in 2011⁴. Majority of these consisted of children who had been abandoned. Simran, a girl in 6th grade at Balgran said, *“I am a girl because of which I was left on the street by my father. My mother tried supporting me but it’s my father who makes all the decisions. I was lying outside a temple when a school teacher at Balgran came to my rescue.”*

There were no official figures of vulnerable children from India on the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) database as the government had never released official statistics on vulnerable children. These children need special care and protection being the most susceptible to poverty, child labour, and child trafficking. Orphans and vulnerable children did not even have a separate legislation in India.

MANPOWER AT BALGRAN

Volunteers at Balgran included mother-wardens, mess staff (cooks), school teachers at Bal Bharti Public School, medical staff, vocational trainers (tailoring, embroidery and candle making), and computer trainers (see Exhibit 3). Since Balgran followed the 'voluntary service model', these volunteers were not paid salaries. The majority of mother-wardens, cooks, vocational trainers, and helpers were people who did not have any other source of income, hence, they were given a place to live in the dormitories and were provided full-time meals without any charge. Fiza Muhammad, serving as a cook in Balgran said, *"When I got divorced two years ago, I did not have any source of earning. I did not want to go back to my parents' house as I did not want to be a burden on them. So, I decided to offer my services at Balgran as I love to be around children. I cook for the children. God always blesses those who feed others. Balgran has given me shelter and food, what more could I have asked for."* Two doctors rendered their services alternatively in the morning and evening for fixed hours. Graduate and post-graduate volunteers served as school teachers at Bal Bharti public school, the majority of whom were university students and housewives pursuing a bachelor in education through correspondence.

Mr. Khajuria struggled to retain volunteers inspite of organizing sessions wherein, the volunteers were appreciated and reminded of the significance of the services offered by them. He said *"most of the volunteers we have are unemployed. We give them place to live and food to eat. Some leave suddenly when they find a job that pays them well. Some people come to volunteer because their friends also volunteer. Such people serve for only 10-15 days. Volunteers are also pressurized by their mother or father to leave social service as it would not help them in earning their livelihood and is a waste of time. There are less volunteers who really want to serve others and learn something new"*.

BALGRAN'S FUNDING MODEL

Balgran relied on the financial support of individuals and organizations to support the costs of construction and maintenance of dormitories, Bal Bharti Public school, healthcare unit, vocational centre, computer centre and to finance higher education of the inducted children. Balgran incurred Rs. 2500 (32.71 USD) to support boarding, lodging and education of a child per month. It was registered under section 80G of the Income Tax Act which grants tax relief to the donors who donate in cash to Balgran.

Its main fundraising sources were individual sponsorships, monthly sponsorships and lifetime meal sponsorships. It received donations both in monetary terms and in-kind wherein majority of the donors were from Jammu. Balgran had been successful in achieving long term engagement of 19 in-kind donors. Funds were also raised by admitting children from neighbouring areas into Bal Bharti Public school at subsidized fees and through the sale of exhibition items handcrafted by Balgran children. Since, Balgran was engaged in generating additional streams of funds by the sale of its services at subsidized rates, it should not be confused with social enterprises.

However, a major cause of concern for Mr. Khajuria was that the organization was dependent only on donations made by private individuals, groups or organizations as Balgran was neither funded by the government nor received funds through CSR. Mr. Raina said “ *we do not have contacts like big NGOs operating at national level to get funds from the government. We are a small local NGO. There is a lot of paperwork and obligations to be met when we want to get funds through CSR. We as a team do not have that much knowledge regarding CSR.* ”

As an individual sponsor, the donor was directly associated with the growing up of a child. The organization sent regular updates about the sponsored child to the donor. The individual was required to sponsor the boarding, lodging and education of a child for a minimum period of six months. As a monthly sponsor, a donor was supposed to sponsor breakfast, lunch, evening tea along with snacks, and dinner per month per child. As a lifetime sponsor, donor was required to deposit a lump sum to provide breakfast, lunch, evening tea with snacks and/or dinner to the children for a year (see Exhibit 4).

PROBLEMS FACED BY BALGRAN

One of the major concerns for Balgran was high turnover of the voluntary staff. Volunteers left after having served for a short duration without any prior intimation once they found a rewarding alternative. This not only affected the continuity of routine activities of the children at Balgran but also posed difficulties for the organization to search for new volunteers possessing the required expertise within a short period.

“I recall a recent incident when three cooks left unexpectedly and we faced a huge problem in finding fresh volunteers. We had to hire cooks by paying daily wages. Such incidents occur often. This puts pressure on the limited funding we have to cater to all the needs of our children.”

Vinod Kumar Raina (Secretary)

By interacting with the voluntary staff and members of the governing body of Balgran, Mr. Khajuria identified the following reasons for high turnover of voluntary staff:

- Volunteers (mother-wardens, cooks, vocational trainers, and helpers) joined Balgran at a time when they did not have any source of income. They offered their services and in turn received meals and a place to live in without any charge. They left the organization once they found a salaried job.
- Volunteers lacked the necessary sensitivity to deeply understand the seriousness of the services they offered in terms of the ways their services positively impacted the lives of children at Balgran.
- Certain volunteers offered their services for a short period as their main motive was gaining recognition for serving the underprivileged as it might potentially increase their chances of gainful employment.
- Pressure from the family members to be gainfully employed pushed certain volunteers to leave Balgran. In India, personal as well as professional decisions of an individual are greatly influenced by their family members.
- Realization after a short period that social service was not their calling. Certain volunteers registered due to peer pressure and hence viewed social service as a mere experiment rather than a responsibility.
- There are few volunteers who really have a humanitarian concern and wish to sincerely help.
- Balgran has few volunteers who are keen for new learning experiences.

Second major problem faced by Balgran was that the potential donors had developed mistrust concerning the fund management of NGO's. They had a belief that NGOs indulged in diversion of funds and lacked integrity. Insincere activities undertaken by certain NGOs affected the credibility of genuine NGOs like Balgran. This lack of trust among the potential donors developed over time due to the following reasons:

- Armed insurgency which has been prevalent in J&K since 1989, raised suspicions among the potential donors regarding the activities of NGOs, and the public often accused such organizations of being a hawala front for militants.
- Past personal experiences of donors with insincere NGOs
- Discussion with peer groups on fake NGOs and how they divert funds
- Media highlighting the NGOs which come under scanner of the regulatory authorities

Due to these trust issues, Balgran faced challenges in raising consistent funding. Balgran was not funded by the government and did not have access to CSR funds primarily due to lack of expertise in the procedures involved in availing CSR funding and poor networking strategies. Moreover, there was variability in the frequency of donations received from individual sponsors, monthly sponsors and lifetime meals sponsor due to the voluntary nature of these sponsorships. The private donor base did not broaden as required because of mistrust among potential donors. Moreover, very few donors outside J&K were willing to contribute to a local NGO operating outside their native states.

Despite these challenges, Mr. Khajuria, assisted by other members of the governing body, tried his best to counsel the voluntary staff reminding them of the immense contribution they made to the organization and the society. They hired a specialist to get knowledge about the processes and the pre-requisites to avail the benefits of CSR. However, they could not succeed in availing CSR benefits and mere counselling did not seem to help Balgran deal with the problems it faced concerning volunteers.

WAY FORWARD

Mr. Khajuria considered the following solutions to address the described challenges: strict screening of the candidates before inducting them into the organization so that only genuine people were inducted as volunteers; assuring transparency to the potential donors by regularly updating the social media handles and paying field visits to various organizations to spread awareness among the potential volunteers and donors about the credibility of Balgran. As far as the funding issues are concerned, he considered offering healthcare services to people outside Balgran at subsidized rates. Mr. A.K Khajuria called for a meeting of the governing body of Balgran in February 2019 to develop a future plan of action to resolve the above-mentioned issues.

EXHIBITS

EXHIBIT 1: CHILDREN IN BALGRAN AS ON JANUARY 2019

Category	Explanation	Number of children
Destitute	Children who are forsaken and cannot meet the basic subsistence needs i.e.; children whose parent(s) are missing or affected due to natural or man-made calamities or militancy or are undergoing a term of imprisonment; whose parent(s) are incapable of supporting their child and any child living on the streets.	43
Orphan	Any child who has lost both parents and does not have family or friends to support him/her	66
Neglected	Children who are seriously neglected or ill-treated by their parent(s) or guardians or subject to immoral influences.	17
Abandoned	Children who are abandoned by their parent(s) due to mental and/or physical disability; extreme poverty and children abandoned by their parent(s) due to non-acceptance of a child before marriage in the society	14
Total		140

Source: Company documents

EXHIBIT 2: ACTIVITY TIMELINE OF BALGRAN

Activity/ Programs	Year of Establishment/ Initiation
A single dormitory with a small mess	1978
Two new dormitories	1985
Three new dormitories and a separate mess	1995
Bal Bharti Public school	2000
A new dormitory and a healthcare centre	2004
Vocational centre	2010
Computer centre	2014
A new dormitory and two cottages	2019

Source: Company documents

EXHIBIT 3: VOLUNTEERS AT BALGRAN AS ON JANUARY 2019

Voluntary staff	Number
Mother-wardens	13
Mess staff (cooks)	6
School teachers at Bal Bharti Public school	15
Medical staff (doctors, nurses)	5
Vocational trainers (tailoring, embroidery and candle making)	3
Computer trainers	2
Helpers	15
Total	59

Source: Company documents

EXHIBIT 4: BALGRANS FUNDING MODEL

Type of Sponsorship	Balgran receives funds in the following ways from the donors
Individual sponsorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rs.1500 (19.63 USD) per month per child for boarding & lodging and, Rs.1000 (13.09 USD) per month per child for education
Monthly sponsorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Breakfast at Rs.400 (5.23 USD) per month per child and, Lunch at Rs.450 (5.89 USD) per month per child and, Evening Tea & Snacks at Rs.250 (3.27 USD) per month per child and, Dinner at Rs.400 (5.23 USD) per month per child
Lifetime meal sponsorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rs. 25,000 (327.14 USD) once in lumpsum to provide dinner to the children for a year and/or, Rs. 12,000 (157.03) once in lumpsum to provide Evening Tea & Snacks to the children for a year and/or Rs. 25,000 (327.14 USD) once in lumpsum to provide breakfast with milk to the children for a year

Source: Company documents

¹ Shah, U. (2015) The struggle of orphans in Kashmir. *The Citizen*, 1 November [Online]. Available at: <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/1/5669/The-Struggle-Of-Orphans-In-Kashmir> [Accessed 2/12/2020].

² Nar, C. (2020) *2020 Orphan Report*. Istanbul: Humanitarian and Social Research Center (INSAMER). Available online: https://insamer.com/rsm/icerik/dosya/dosya_2928.pdf [Accessed 2/12/2020].

³ International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF (2017) *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16*. Mumbai: IIPS. Available online: <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/nfhs-4Reports/India.pdf> [Accessed 2/12/2020].

⁴ SOS Children's Villages Canada (2011) *India now home to 20 million orphans, study finds*. Available online: <https://www.soschildrensvillages.ca/india-now-home-20-million-orphans-study-finds> [Accessed 2/12/2020].