



Review Article

Village Defence Guards Scheme (VDGS) in Jammu & Kashmir: An Opportunity to Empower the Civilians

 Neeta Rani^{1*}, Rouchi Chaudhary²

¹Associate Professor, Department of National Security Studies, Central University of Jammu, Jammu & Kashmir, India

²Associate Professor, Department of Public Policy and Public Administration, Central University of Jammu, Jammu & Kashmir, India

Corresponding Author: * Neeta Rani 

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14140977>

| Abstract | Manuscript Information |
|---|--|
| <p>The security forces in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) have been dealing with terrorist activities since India's independence in 1947. These forces have always been the first line of defense in countering external threats and aggression; but the border areas, which are far-flung of and have poor road connectivity and infrastructure, become more vulnerable to militant attacks due to the lack of speedy mobility of the security forces into these areas. Therefore, the government of India came up with the idea of self-defense by establishing a civil militia in such border areas, known as Village Defence Committees (VDCs). Village Defence Guards (VDGs) is the new version of VDCs, which plays a critical role in maintaining peace and security in the rural areas of J&K. VDGs are significant and revived based on the need of the hour. Despite several challenges, VDGs can emerge as a crucial line of defence for the residents of the border area villages. The paper highlights the reasons for the revival of VDGs along with their role and how these are empowering the local civilians. The focus has also been drawn towards the significance of VDGs and what can be done in the future to enhance the efficiency of VDGs volunteers.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397 ▪ Received: 11-08-2024 ▪ Accepted: 20-09-2024 ▪ Published: 13-11-2024 ▪ IJCRM:3(6); 2024: 35-42 ▪ ©2024, All Rights Reserved ▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes ▪ Peer Review Process: Yes <p>How to Cite this Manuscript</p> <p>Neeta Rani, Rouchi Chaudhary. Village Defence Guards Scheme (VDGS) in Jammu & Kashmir: An Opportunity to Empower the Civilians. International Journal of Contemporary Research in Multidisciplinary.2024; 3(6):35-42.</p> |

KEYWORDS: Civilian, Empowerment, Jammu & Kashmir, Security, VDCs, VDGs.

1. INTRODUCTION

In March 2022, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs set up Village Defence Guards (VDGs) in the vulnerable areas of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Amid the militant attacks in J&K, the Lieutenant Governor declared the revival of earlier existing Village Defence Committees (VDCs) with new names and revised versions. Though based on a similar concept, the VDG Scheme has been amended as per the new obligations. It came into operation on August 15, 2022, and plays a critical role, especially in the rural areas of J&K, in the maintenance of peace

and security. Armed with automatic weapons and trained by specialized forces, the VDGs focus on creating deterrence and resistance to terrorist activities. The aim of VDGs centred around the establishment of a group of volunteer armed civilians in certain villages, who will safeguard and defend their areas and inculcate a sense of self-protection among residents. Having over 6000 members, the VDG scheme consists of 875 committees and has been considered as a crucial line of defence (ANI, 2023).

2. Emergence of the Idea of self-defence

In Jammu in Kashmir, the idea of self-defence and preservation came into existence with the creation of Village Defence Committees (VDCs). Indeed, the creation of VDCs marked a significant development in the promotion of safeguarding oneself and others in the region. Initially, VDCs were established in 1990s with armed civilian population as force multiplier against the terrorists and to counter militant attacks. These were formed during the peak of militancy and insurgency in the region, with the primary objective of empowering local communities to defend themselves against security threats. VDCs was comprised of local volunteers who were armed and trained to protect their villages and communities from militant attacks, hence often play a significant role in bolstering security in areas where government security forces may not have a strong presence.

As the insurgency escalated in late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly in rural areas, local communities felt increasingly vulnerable to militant attacks and infiltration. The Kashmir militancy which spread to the adjacent areas of Doda district in 1990s, led to sense a self-defence among the civilian. In 1993, when 13 people in Kishtwar were exterminated, the requirement for equipped and trained civilian with weapons and ammunition was originated.

In 1995, the Ministry of Home Affairs set up VDCs scheme, when the militancy increased in other districts of Jammu division, specifically in the areas of Kathua, Poonch, Reasi, Rajouri, Samba, Udhampur districts; the scheme also broadly focused on including and covering such areas. The government chose to opt for pre-emptive and a positive approach, with a broader framework, for the management of security-related issues and, further, to secure such regions which were affected by insurgency. Such initiative, in general, is often a response to emerging security risks, aiming to ensure that measures in place create a secure environment in different districts along with addressing effectively the novel challenges posed by the terrorists. The establishment of VDCs indicated a shift in the direction of empowering local people with respect to their own security. It also signalled the constraint of centralised security for giving inadequate defence to the vulnerable remote areas.

In this regard, the presence of local villagers/volunteers and ex-servicemen in VDCs was a significant shift to assist the security forces along with bolstering the skills of this local militia. The recruitment of individuals with military background, training, experience and skills, set a stage for the advancement of VDCs and was a remarkable addition to the encouragement of volunteers. With such combinations, VDCs played a vital role during the pinnacle of militancy in the affected remote areas within the Jammu division and emerged as a formidable armed militia to counter militant activities and save their lives with operational skills and high morale.

At present, the VDCs have been revived in the form of Village Defence Guards (VDGs) in the Union territory of J&K and has stimulated the need for self-defence in those remote areas which are scuffling to get immediate military support; VDGs fill a crucial gap in such conditions. Under VDGs scheme, the local

volunteers are empowered to resist infiltration and violence from militant groups and take responsibility of their own security. As per the mandate, VDGs empower local communities by mobilising residents to take an active role in their own defence. Moreover, the formation of VDGs helps in building a sense of more solidarity and resilience among locals who are under threats from the militants. By organizing and providing training to the volunteers from militants' influenced areas, they enable communities to protect themselves, their families and their properties from militant attacks. Under VDCs, the locals became aware about the importance of their own and community's protection and realized the need to remain vigilant against any potential threats. Nevertheless, VDGs enhanced its focus on more rigorous training session and awareness programmes, educating locals about security protocols, risk mitigation strategies and the importance of reporting suspicious activities. Based on the similar notion of VDCs, VDGs aimed at providing communities of vulnerable remote and hilly regions with weapons and training for their defence against the militancy related threats. Even today, the approach of self defence is prevalent especially in areas where the armed forces may have limited presence or response time, leaving residents vulnerable to attacks from any source of instability. In areas with inadequate networks where the movement of military forces might be delayed, VDGs can provide the crucial first line of defence. Their ability to respond swiftly to threat helps to prevent attacks and minimise the impact of militant incursions. Furthermore, the VDGs also focus more on collaborating closely with law enforcement agencies and armed services to coordinate the protective measures and overall security architecture in the region, and also to facilitate coordinated responses to emerging threats. They can assist efficiently the security forces in capturing and neutralizing militants. By raising security awareness, empowering the local communities, collaborating with government authorities and serving as deterrents to terrorists, VDGs (similar to VDCs) can actively assist in the perseverance of calm and secure region at the challenging time period of conflicts. The VDGs can be effective in a number of ways, for example- the volunteers carry local knowledge and expertise, being nearby they can respond on time without any delay, they can provide assistance in counter-insurgency operations etc. This local militia's sturdy knowledge about region's topography and terrain has a distinct advantage over the militants. With wide-ranging and comprehensive information, the VDGs volunteers can navigate the terrain effectively and anticipate the militant movement, thereby thwarting many potential attacks. Their cooperation and local intelligence proved to be invaluable in identifying militant hideouts and facilitating successful counterinsurgency operation.

The VDG's role can be critical in combating militancy in difficult terrains and they can help maintain stability and a secure environment. The involvement of VDGs in such initiatives highlights the effectiveness of community-based security initiatives in complementing broader counterinsurgency efforts.

3. VDCs & VDGs: Similarities & Difference

Following a similar notion, the Village Defence Guards Scheme is related to Village Defence Committees with certain amendments and updations. While VDCs and VDGs scheme are initiatives aimed at enhancing the local security and defence in the context of conflict-ridden areas in Jammu and Kashmir, both have similarities and differences based on their autonomy, structure, regulations, legal status and areas of operations:

Autonomy: VDCs were primarily established in the 1990s in response to the militancy in certain territories of the districts of J&K, they were often sanctioned and supported by government authorities and operated under official recognition and oversight. On the other side, VDGs receive support from authorities but operate with greater autonomy and flexibility as compared to VDCs. VDGs emerge more gradually from within the residents in response to localized security threats or the absence of effective law enforcement.

Structure: VDCs functioned under a centralised structure, it had a hierarchical organization with designated leaders and committees. VDGs have a more fluid and decentralised structure.

Regulations and Legal Status: VDCs were operating under legitimate orders, recognition and authorized assistance. These were regulated by specific laws and policies which administered their formation, roles, responsibilities, training and coordination with law enforcement agencies. VDGs are government-recognized bodies with a decentralised nature and are driven primarily by community initiative and local needs.

Operations: Both VDCs and VDGs focus on security-related activities including patrolling, intelligence gathering and coordinating with law enforcement agencies. VDCs used to cover larger geographical areas including multiple villages within a region, whereas VDGs focus on specific villages or neighbourhoods within a community to enhance security and protect residents within their immediate vicinity. Both VDCs and VDGs share the goal of improving local security in rural areas. In VDCs, only the SPOs used to receive a payment of Rs 1500/- per month, whereas all VDGs are being paid. "VDGs are divided into two categories *i.e.* V1 category and V2 category. V1 category includes the persons who head/lead/coordinate the VDGs in the "more vulnerable areas" and shall be paid Rs. 4500/- per month; and V2 category has the person who are members of VDGs on voluntary basis and shall be paid a uniform rate of Rs. 4000/- per month (Home Department, 2022: 4). Further, VDGs are trained in basic security protocols, including handling of weapons and first aid. Regular training sessions are conducted to enhance their skills and ensure their readiness to respond to any emergency. The police organise special training camps in districts of Jammu division to enhance the skills of VDGs so that the militants can be countered efficiently and

insurgency threats can be tackled effectively (Raina, 2023). They are provided with communication devices to ensure effective coordination with the authorities.

VDCs were headed by a Special Police Officer (SPO) who was in charge, and under him, a total of 10-15 other volunteer members worked which consisted mostly of former military persons. They were provided with .303 rifles and shells. However, VDGs include 15-armed civilians in a group who have been provided with self-loading rifles (SLRs) with 100 rounds of ammunition each (Kaushik, 2023). Further, the Senior superintendent of police (SSP) or the superintendent of police (SP) directs VDGs under their command in the concerned districts (Home Department, 2022: 4).

VDCs were proactive in their approach, mobilising individuals who were capable of responding to terrorist incursions into villages. Their proactive stance stood essential for the deterrence and defence against militant activities, hence reviving VDGs with a similar notion of providing security. VDGs, like VDCs, reflect a concerted effort to leverage local resources and expertise in safeguarding communities from terrorist threats.

4. Reasons for the revival of VDGs

Jammu and Kashmir, nevertheless, have a challenging security scenario even at present, though to a lesser extent. As the region continues to grapple with the persistent threat of insurgency and cross-border terrorism, which has created a volatile environment in J&K, the armed forces, now and then, are confronting the militants and the rural vulnerable areas become more prone to terrorist attacks. The presence of militants in different areas of the regions in J&K further exacerbates the security concerns in the region. As a result, there is a growing need to strengthen security mechanisms along with enhanced intelligence gathering to effectively counter militant threats.

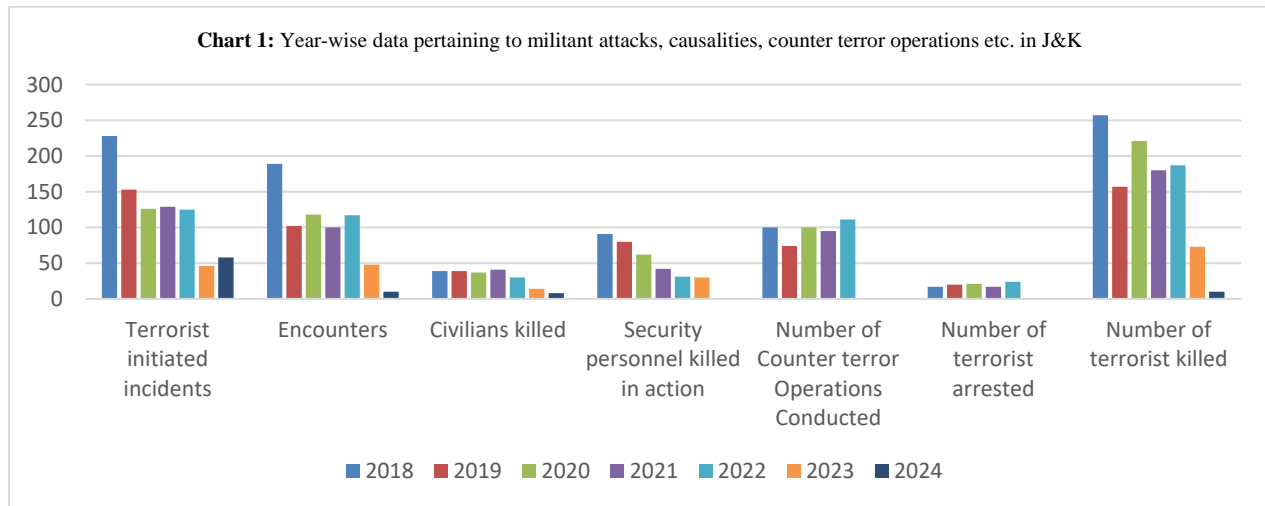
VDGs offer a community-based approach to security that complements the efforts of armed forces. By mobilising residents and empowering them with training and resources, VDGs can help in enhancing the defence capabilities of border communities and serve as a force multiplier in countering security threats.

There have been several incidents of militant attacks and killings in the past which encouraged the revival of VDGs. The prolonged terror-related strikes in the border areas highlight the urgent need for reinstating the VDCs with reconsiderations. Table 1 reflects that there had been a total 129 terrorist-initiated incidents in the year 2021, followed by 100 encounters, 41 civilian fatalities, 42 security personnel deaths and 180 terrorist killings. As compared to this, the year 2020 reflects different statistics under which a total of 126 terrorist-initiated incidents occurred, followed by 118 encounters, 37 civilian casualties, 62 security personnel losses and 221 terrorist killings.

Table 1: Year-wise data about militant attacks, & related activities in J&K

| Description | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Terrorist initiated incidents | 228 | 153 | 126 | 129 | 125 | 46 | 58 |
| Encounters | 189 | 102 | 118 | 100 | 117 | 48 | 10 |
| Civilians killed | 39 | 39 | 37 | 41 | 30 | 14 | 08 |
| Security personnel killed in action | 91 | 80 | 62 | 42 | 31 | 30 | 01 |
| Number of Counter-terror Operations Conducted | 100 | 74 | 100 | 95 | 111 | - | - |
| Number of terrorists arrested | 17 | 20 | 21 | 17 | 24 | - | - |
| Number of terrorists killed | 257 | 157 | 221 | 180 | 187 | 73 | 10 |

Source: Sansad.in & South Asia Terrorism Portal¹



In 2022, terrorists carried out a suicide attack on an Army camp in the Darhal area of Rajouri district, resulting in the death of 5 army personnel. Similarly, in May 2023, 5 army personnel lost their lives during an anti-terrorist operation in Chamrer forest (PTI, 2024). On January 01, 2023, militants killed five persons in Rajouri’s Dhangri village. Further, they planted an improvised explosive device (IED) near one of the houses of these victims, before fleeing; this resulted in the killing of two children and injuries to 14 other people. In another incident, a VDG Mohd Sharief in Udhampur district’s Basantgarh area was killed during an encounter with militants in the far-off village Panara in the Chochru Gala Heights on April 28, 2024 (Ashiq, 2024). Later the security forces, including police, army and CRPF, launched a joint hunt operation to nab the militants. These terrorists had an encounter with the police and VDG members after reaching to the adjoining Basantgarh village and were heading for Chenab Valley. To disrupt peace in J&K during Lok Samba elections, an encounter took place between security forces and militants on May 11, 2024 in Udhampur, wherein a VDG was killed. Such incidents emphasise the risks faced by local residents who volunteer to assist security forces in counter-terrorism and maintaining law and order in their areas. Such tragic events heightened the sense of insecurity among the local population. The resurgence of militant activities in areas where peace had long been restored sparked the demand for revival of VDCs. Therefore, the government introduced an initiative which aimed at empowering the civilians to protect themselves

and their communities. The government has started providing upgraded technology weapons, ammunition and training to the volunteers of VDGs.

There are various other reasons which had driven the demand for a revival of the VDCs, leading to the formation of VDGs. Such reasons are listed below:

Security challenges in border districts: The return of militant activities in previously peaceful area indicates a gap in security measures or a failure to sustain peace. In response, communities advocated for the reinstatement of VDCs to fill their security void and protect against potential threats. Till date, number of cross-border infiltration incidents and terrorist activities keep on happening in J&K border areas, leading to the requirement of revival of VDGs.

Inadequate government response: In areas where the government’s security apparatus is perceived as inadequate or insufficient, there seemed the requirement of reinstatement and revival of VDCs to fill the security gap and to address specific security challenged unique to localities.

Deterioration of law and order: Some of the areas face certain law and order issues due to factors such as crime, insurgency, or communal violence. Such situations require VDGs to restore peace, order and stability among communities.

Historical effectiveness of VDCs: The VDCs, in the past, were effective in countering militancy. Past successes of VDCs in maintaining security and thwarting militant activities also drove the demand for their revival. Further, being a means to empower local residents, VDCs had fostered a sense of ownership over the

security of communities. This led to the revival of a self-defence mechanism so that the social cohesion and resilience at the time of any security threats can be strengthened and challenges can be confronted.

Preventing escalation: VDGs are quick in response mechanisms, especially in the absence of immediate arrival of security forces. At the very beginning, militant activities need to be addressed and, additionally, it is crucial to prevent their escalation too. It assists in restoring long-term peace and tranquillity. Hence, the revival of VDCs is a proactive measure to address the security threat before their escalation to greater conflicts.

Basis of intelligence: VDGs are an incredible basis of intelligence for the armed forces. Well-versed with the environment and local conditions, they keep an eye on the devious individuals and activities in the close vicinity. This collaboration of local volunteers with the armed forces is a must and significant for the effectiveness of counter-insurgency operations.

Through VDGs, a proactive approach to security and mobilisation of local people can opt to mitigate security threats along with safeguarding the well-being of the people in these vulnerable areas. The demand for the revival of VDGs is driven by a combination of security concerns, perceived gaps in government response and the desire for community empowerment and self-reliance in matters of security.

5. Role & Significance of VDGs

In terms of national security, the border areas and districts carry strategic significance. These areas, in the past, were conflict-ridden and turmoiled which, at a later stage, improved to a considerable extent. Here, the establishment of VDGs can contribute to the strengthening of overall security architecture in these areas in terms of building stability and peace. At present, VDGs are serving as a crucial frontline defence against the militants who seek to disrupt peace and stability along the border areas. VDGs are also contributing in the empowerment of local residents who are provided with weapons and arms training. It helps them in opting for proactive measures to safeguard their own protection. From response to militant incursions and protecting against theft and robbery to maintaining law and order within their areas are the main roles played by VDGs.

Undeniably, VDGs can act as a significant deterrent to the militant groups. It can beckon to the terrorist that local people are organized and prepared to defend themselves against any threat, dissuading the belligerent from additional attacks. The mere existence of organised local militia within settlements sends a strong message to terrorist that any attempt to attack the community will be met with staunch resistance. Now a days, VDGs have an organised visible presence in the militancy affected areas which is an indication to the terrorists that the community has prepared itself and can manage to guard themselves against notorious non-state actors. The deterrence effect can dissuade militants from targeting such areas and communities; they may perceive the risk of encountering stiff resistance as too high, for example- In a skirmish occurred in the

month of August 2023, VDGs members shown courage and killed a terrorist with the help of their .303 rifles in Rajouri. Such episode reflects the strong will power of the VDGs volunteers to protect their communities and counter militant attacks enthusiastically. Therefore, the information of local communities being active in self-defence likely to discourage the militants from targeting such areas with VDGs; thereby, it will contribute to the preservation of peace and stability. In addition to self-protection, VDGs can also play a role in disaster response and crisis management. During emergencies, such as natural disasters or militant attacks, VDGs can mobilise quickly to provide assistance, support and relief to the affected communities while demonstrating their commitment to preserve life and property.

Furthermore, VDG volunteers are typically trained and equipped to respond efficiently to security threats. This level of preparedness demonstrates to terrorists that villagers are not easy targets and are capable of mounting a formidable defence. VDGs are often able to respond swiftly to security incidents, minimizing the impact of any potential terrorist attack. The knowledge that the community can mobilize quickly to defend itself can discourage militants from attempting to carry out attacks. The formation of VDGs fosters unity and solidarity within the community, hence the militants are less likely to target villages where residents are united and stand together against external threats, as they understand that any attack would be met with collective resistance. The presence of VDGs increases the risk of failure for terrorists, as they understand that any attack on a village with an active defence group is likely to encounter strong resistance, leading to potential casualties or capture.

VDGs also play a crucial role as sources for the collection of intelligence in addition to their defensive capabilities. They are often local residents of the villages which gives them close knowledge of the local terrain, population, and potential security threats emerging from non-state actors. Members of VDGs conduct surveillance and monitoring of their surroundings while keeping a watchful eye on suspicious activities and reporting any security-related threats promptly. They easily recognise the ambiguous persons and dubious activities in their respective areas which they, instantaneously, report to the security services. This proactive approach to monitoring helps the defence forces to detect and prevent terrorists' activities before they escalate. They contribute in transferring valuable intelligence to the defence forces and help in peace building. Further, VDGs are embedded within the community which allows them to have an extensive network of contacts and informants. They rely on these networks to gather information about militant activities, movements and their hideouts that provide actionable intelligence to defence forces. VDGs are serving as communication channels between the local population and defence forces. Based on their inputs and information, a rapid and coordinated response can be arranged by the authorities to counter terrorist related incidents, threats or unusual activities. Militants launch attacks on different communities in the border regions of Jammu, targeting people from all culture and religions. VDGs volunteers can facilitate inter-community

cooperation and cohesion, while transcending religious or ethnic divides. By involving volunteers from different communities, VDGs prompt solidarity and mutual support in the face of threats. Further, it helps in fostering a sense of shared responsibility for peace and security. VDGs, composed of individuals familiar with the local culture, customs and social dynamics, are better equipped to navigate complex inter-community relations and address grievances that may fuel militancy. Being thoroughly acquaintances with the community, VDG members opt for culturally sensitive approaches to conflict resolution and engage in dialogue to prevent radicalization and violence. Since their roots lie in the local community and they are accountable to its members, the volunteers of VDGs enjoy a high level of trust and legitimacy as compare to other defence forces. This trust is essential for effective collaboration between the communities and military forces to facilitate intelligence sharing and cooperation in counterinsurgency operations.

VDGs are adaptable and can tailor their strategies and tactics to suit the specific needs and challenges of their communities. This flexibility enhances their effectiveness in countering militancy and promoting stability in diverse regions. Terrorist groups often rely on local support networks for different reasons, such as for shelter, supplies, information etc. The presence of VDGs civil militia disrupts these networks and makes it more difficult for the terrorists to operate covertly within communities. The fear of losing local support can further discourage militants from targeting villages with active VDGs.

J&K is characterised by diverse demographic profiles, hence VDGs are essential in such regions. By empowering local residents, fostering inter-community cooperation and promoting culturally sensitive approaches to conflict resolution, VDGs play a significant role in mitigating the impact of militancy and building sustainable peace in conflict-affected areas.

6. Challenges & Way Ahead

The VDCs played a significant role in fostering the idea of self defence and preservation in Jammu & Kashmir. Since now, VDGs have overtaken VDCs, it is the prime duty of its members to tackle with the challenges which are there or may prevail in future. At present, there are many volunteer members of VDGs and others who are continuing to be targeted by terrorists. This issue requires serious deliberations. As mentioned earlier in this work, there have been several incidents of killings of security forces and VDGs members, which strongly require government's consideration. The provision of providing weapons and arms training to VDGs emphasises the importance of community-based approaches to security in regions where traditional law enforcement or military solutions may be insufficient. However, it also becomes essential to ensure that such initiatives are implemented responsibly. Proper legal and ethical standards need to be followed to avoid potential misuse of weapons and escalation of violence. The goal of VDGs is, typically, to remain in the augmentation of the capabilities of local communities to resist and deter the attack from any threat and also in providing security to each other. However, it is important that arming civilians can raise concerns about the

potential escalation of violence and the need to ensure responsible use of firearms. In the past, VDCs were accused of human rights violations which include extortions, rape and murder along with mishandling of firearms (sharma, 2023)ⁱⁱ For example- The killing of Shamim Ahmed Lone by VDC members in Kishtwar district in 2013 and kidnapping and rape of a woman in same year and district by men, who were supported and protected by VDC, are another tragic reminder of the human rights abuses that have occurred in the conflict-affected region of J&K. These incidents allegedly involved VDC members, raised serious concerns about the misuse of power and authority by such groups. Such scenarios called for greater accountability and oversight about VDCs. An incident occurred in December 2015 in Budhal village of Rajouri district in J&K in which, Shamima Akhter, along with her three years old son, lost lives when Mushtaq Ahmad, a member of the VDC, shot them with his government-issued .303 rifle (Bureau, 2015). The killing of Shamima Akhter and her son sparked outrage among the local population, leading to the demand for a ban on VDCs. Such incidents highlighted the need for greater accountability and oversight of these committees to prevent abuses of power and protect the rights of civilians. In the same year 2015, Kewal Sharma, another VDC member murdered Ishtiyahq Ahmed, who belonged to the regional political party by using his .303 rifle after a confrontation in the Rajouri district.

In another instance, Rubina Koser, aged 30, died after the .303 rifle of her husband Nisar Hussain, a VDC member, accidentally went off on January 26, 2023 in Upper Marrah village in Poonch district (Agencies, 2023). Such incident highlights the importance of proper training, handling and storage of firearms to prevent unintended harm to oneself and others. In district Doda, 35 years old man shot himself and committed suicide with a rifle belonging to his elder brother, a VDC member, on March 5, 2023 (Yusafzai, 2023). The incident further raised questions on the handling and responsibilities of VDC members. Many critics have raised their concerns about human rights abuses and allegations of excesses committed by some VDC members; a similar threat is assumed from the VDG members also.ⁱⁱⁱ There are potential concerns of abuses and excesses by armed civilian groups, henceforth require a proactive approach before such situation arises. Nevertheless, VDGs remain a distinguished feature of the security landscape in Jammu and Kashmir. It reflects the complex rigid dynamics of conflicts and governance in the region. The following suggestions have been provided which can further help in enhancing VDGs efficiency: -

- Implementation of a robust control mechanism is indeed crucial to ensure that VDGs cadres remain motivated, focused and align with their objectives.
- Revival of VDGs is an opportunity to empower local civilian with a sense of self-defence. It is well-suited to understand and address the rapidly changing dynamics in the conflicting zones. The goal of empowerment can be accomplished with the rigorous regular training session and also by providing continuous guidance to VDGs scheme members which can help reinforce their sense of purpose and commitment.

- VDGs members can understand their role and responsibilities with the establishment of clear objectives and their outcomes along with transparent guidelines and performance metrics. This clarity fosters accountability among VDGs members and also helps in motivating these volunteers with a prime focus on achieving their goals.
- The training of the VDGs volunteers needs to include overall aspects, including tactical skills, the importance of adhering to ethical and legal standards in their operations, discipline etc. Strong leadership can inspire and motivate volunteers and ensure that they remain dedicated to their duties and objectives. Hence, the appointment of capable and accountable leaders within VDGs is essential for the code of conduct, discipline and focus among members.
- There is a requirement of the enactment of a system under which regular monitoring and evaluation of VDG activities can be observed and supervised. This will assist the supervisors in the assessment of volunteers' performances and in identifying those areas which require improvement. It can also provide constructive feedback to the volunteers for their better performances and morale boosting.
- Leveraging the revival of VDGs as an opportunity to empower local bodies particularly Panchayats, can enhance coordination and cooperation between community-based security initiatives and official governance structures. Panchayats, with their understanding of local dynamics, can provide valuable insights and support to VDGs, ensuring that their efforts are align with broader development goals and community priorities.
- Incentives such as commendations, awards or opportunities for career advancement can encourage VDGs volunteers to maintain their dedication and focus. Hence, it is important to recognise the contributions of VDGs and give them rewards, with this their morale will be higher and they will feel motivated to work for the betterment.
- A sense of ownership and collective responsibility inculcate the active participation and engagement from the local community. Hence, local residents need to be encouraged more to stand against militant attacks and safeguard their communities. Further, there is a requirement of the participation of community members in decision-making process along with their collaborations which can strengthen community resilience and denote the support for security related schemes.
- The VDGs scheme has the potential to create employment opportunities in rural border militant vulnerable areas. The government should encourage more participation of volunteers with certain provisions so that the community engagement can be enhanced and security environment can be improved.

These measures/suggestions can help the authorities to establish an effective control mechanism for the VDGs. It shall also empower the local bodies like Panchayats to play a more active role in while tackling with the threats in conflicting zones. This integrated approach fosters collaboration, enhances

accountability and ensures that VDGs remain motivated, and focused and align with the broader interests of the community. In general, the presence of VDGs underlines the complex dynamics of security and governance in conflict-affected areas like J&K, where local initiatives often emerge in response to challenging circumstances. The revival of VDGs scheme presents a significant opportunity to empower the civilian population and reinforce the security infrastructure in rural areas. By instating and bolstering VDGs, the government will be able to tap into the local knowledge and capabilities of the local residents, enabling them to play a crucial role in safeguarding their communities. Hence, it is imperative for the government to prioritise the implementation of this scheme and provide the necessary support to empower the civilian population in safeguarding their villages.

Acknowledgement: The authors acknowledge the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) for funding this research work under a sponsored research project.

Conflict of Interest: The authors claim no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

1. The Kashmir Horizon. Women dies as husband's rifle 'goes off' in Poonch [Internet]. The Kashmir Horizon; 2023 Jan 27 [cited 2024 May 21]. Available from: <https://thekashmirhorizon.com/2023/01/27/woman-dies-as-husbands-rifle-goes-off-in-poonch/>
2. ANI News. Armed with rifles, Women Village Defence Guards in J&K villages ready to fight [Internet]. 2023 Dec 17 [cited 2024 May 23]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3Hto-DY7yw>
3. Ashiq P. Village defence guard member killed in shootout with militants in Jammu's Udhampur police [Internet]. The Hindu; 2024 Apr 28 [cited 2024 May 21]. Available from: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/village-defence-guard-member-killed-in-shootout-with-militants-in-jammus-udhampur-police/article68117322.ece>
4. Home Department. Village Defence Guards Scheme (VDGS-2022) [Internet]. Government of Jammu and Kashmir; 2022 [cited 2024 May 24]. Available from: <https://www.jkhome.nic.in/pdf/287of2022.pdf>
5. Kaushi A. India's Village Defence Guards: Arming Civilian to Hunt Terrorists [Internet]. Defence XP; 2023 May 8 [cited 2024 May 22]. Available from: <https://www.defencexp.com/indias-village-defence-guards-arming-civilians-to-hunt-terrorists/#:~:text=The%20VDGs%20will%20not%20con%20ist,religious%20facilities%20and%20public%20structures.>
6. PTI. One IAF soldier killed, 4 injured in terror attack ahead of LS polls in J&K's Poonch [Internet]. Deccan Herald; 2024 May 4 [cited 2024 May 21]. Available from: <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/jammu-and-kashmir/five-soldiers-injured-in-terror-attack-on-security-convoy-ahead-of-ls-polls-in-jks-poonch-3007930>

7. Raina S. As J&K Govt Reactivates A Controversial Civilian Militia, Local Hindus in an Isolated Village Feel Safer [Internet]. Article 14; 2023 Apr 5 [cited 2024 May 23]. Available from: <https://article-14.com/post/as-j-k-govt-reactivates-a-controversial-civilian-militia-local-hindus-in-an-isolated-village-feel-safer--642cd92d7f8f0>
8. Sharma A. What are Village Defence Committees, Which J&K Locals want revived amid militant attacks [Internet]. The Indian Express; 2023 Jan 9 [cited 2024 May 27]. Available from: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-politics/what-are-village-defence-committees-which-jk-locals-want-revived-8363980/>
9. The Citizen Bureau. Woman, Child killed by Village Defence Committee Member [Internet]. The Citizen; 2015 Dec 27 [cited 2024 May 26]. Available from: <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/3/6300/Woman-Child-Killed-By-Village-Defence-Committee-Member>
10. Yusafzai TNK. Man shoots himself dead with brother's weapon [Internet]. Greater Kashmir; 2023 Mar 5 [cited 2024 May 23]. Available from: <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/chenab-valley/man-shoots-himself-dead-with-vdc-brothers-weapon/>

| Creative Commons (CC) License |
|--|
| <p>This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.</p> |

ⁱ The data has been collected jointly from the official website of Indian Parliament which was available in the Lok Sabha questions answer section. <https://sansad.in/getFile/annex/259/AU688.pdf?source=pqars> (accessed on 23 May 2024) & South Asia Terrorism Portal (till 21 May 2024)

ⁱⁱ During state legislative assembly in 2016, the J&K government informed that 221 first information reports (FIRs) were filed against the members of VDCs which included 23 murder charges and 7 rape and 15 rioting cases. Out of these, only 2.7% of the cases were resulted in conviction (Sharma, Arun (9 January 2023), What are Village Defence Committees, Which J&K Locals want revived amid militant attacks, *The Indian Express*, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-politics/what-are-village-defence-committees-which-jk-locals-want-revived-8363980/> accessed on 27 May 2024).

ⁱⁱⁱ Salwa Judum is an example of a civil militia indulged in human rights violations. It gained popularity which did not last for too long, as repeated complaints of human rights violations by volunteers, of mercilessly beating up individuals and even raping of women in tribal areas. these incidents resulted in filing of petition in the Supreme Court to ban Salwa Judum; later on 5 July 2011, Salwa Judum was declared illegal and unconstitutional and the Supreme Court ordered for its disbandment. (Venkatesan, J (4 December 2021), Salwa Judum is Illegal, Says Supreme Court, *The Hindu*, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Salwa-Judum-is-illegal-says-Supreme-Court/article13639702.ece> accessed on 27 May 2024.)