

JAMMU, VILLAGE DEFENCE AND GOVERNANCE

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Army personnel supervising the training of Village Defence Committee (VDC) members near the Line of Control in the Balnoi area, in Jammu and Kashmir | Photo Credit: ANI

The rise in terror-related strikes in the relatively peaceful Jammu division, especially in the border districts of Rajouri and Poonch, needs a closer look. In spite of militancy-related indices not being a cause for alarm, any complacency on the part of the state could be disastrous in the mid and long terms. The dynamics of militancy in these regions are different from those prevalent in Kashmir due to the demographic profile of an almost equal proportion of Hindus and Muslims. The agency of the local population in a conflict zone cannot be overlooked. Conflict resolution in such regions is a function of utilising the potential of people by facilitating their participation in decision making and execution vis-à-vis issues concerning them.

There have been several terror-related incidents in the region of Jammu division over the last year with the gravest of them so far having been committed in Dangri village in Rajouri district at the beginning of the year. In January, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, there were infiltration attempts, recoveries of war-like stores, explosions followed by gunshots at the house of a local MLA, a neutralisation of hideouts, and the nabbing of suspects in Rajouri and Poonch.

Since Dangri happened, the demand for a revival of the erstwhile Village Defence Committees (VDC) has emerged from different quarters. The government had issued instructions to operationalise VDC (rechristened as Village Defence Guards, or VDG) in August 2022. As in the policy, the VDGs were to instil a sense of self protection, with the district's superintendent of police mandated to exercise command and control. VDCs have played a crucial role in containing militancy in the Jammu division, after being set up in the mid-1990s. Pockets with a VDC presence were those in remote areas; their difficult terrain and a meagre presence of security forces made chances of successful operations remote. VDCs were trained to hold the front against militants till the arrival of security forces, thus proving to be force multipliers.

However, in several cases, the VDCs have proved to be counterproductive, with instances of cadres abusing their authority and even facing allegations of human rights violations. Given the lower levels of insurgency and state support, a 'false notion of power' developing in the minds of VDC cadre is quite natural, leading to potentially adverse fallouts. However, the benefits of the VDC far outweigh their drawbacks, leading to the decision to revive them.

State policy on the VDGs must now aim to mitigate the negatives, which lies in viewing the issue

through the prism of human resources management of the cadres. There needs to be an evolution of a hands-down command and control mechanism. The present methodology of being under the superintendent of police, i.e., a top-down approach, may not be the ideal arrangement as it will be found wanting in terms of close supervision at the execution level. A good control mechanism is needed to ensure that cadres remain motivated and focused.

One of the most encouraging facets of democracy in Jammu and Kashmir has been the enthusiasm of people in electing and trusting local bodies. The Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) Panchayati Raj Act of 1989 amended in 2020, paved the way for the setting up of the District Development Council. This completed the three-tier local-governance structure and reinforced the other two bodies, at the panchayat and block levels. However, due to the security situation and socio-political uncertainties, the empowerment of local bodies never moved beyond holding elections.

The revival of the VDG should be used as an opportunity to empower the local bodies. Panchayats are most suited to understand local dynamics in a conflict zone that change rapidly from one sub-region to the other. In addition to the compulsory functions, panchayats could be entrusted with the task of assisting the local police in an institutionalised manner. This will create advantages such as expanding the stakeholdership of the local population in security matters, a quality check on the character of VDG cadres during the selection stage as well as monitoring their activities and having consolidated control by means of oversight and deterrence.

From a practitioner's point of view, the VDGs should never be sucked into proactive intelligence and tactical operations, and must instead remain confined to 'self defence and deterrence roles'. Or else, they will end up as one more agency hunting dwindling numbers of militants.

Entrusting local bodies to manage the VDGs would elicit a positive vibrancy from the population that normally does not manifest when a measure is enforced top down in a bureaucratic manner. The key to a resolution of challenges in J&K lies in empowering the local population by strengthening democracy and making it more participatory at the grassroots — the Gandhian way of decentralised governance.

Colonel Shashank Ranjan served in the Indian Army as an infantry officer, which includes operations in Jammu and Kashmir. He is a PhD scholar

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