

GUARDIANS OF HINTERLAND

Village Defence Groups (VDGs) have long occupied a complex and evolving space in India's internal security architecture, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir. Conceived as a grassroots security mechanism, VDGs were intended to empower villagers to protect themselves against terrorist threats in remote and vulnerable areas where the reach of regular security forces is limited.

At their core, VDGs are rooted in community participation. In areas prone to terrorist movement and cross-border infiltration, especially in the hilly and forested belts, villagers are often the first to sense unusual activity. By involving local residents in basic defensive preparedness, the state aimed to create an early-warning system and a psychological deterrent against terrorist attacks. In many instances, VDG members have played a crucial role in alerting security forces, preventing casualties, and safeguarding villages during periods of heightened insurgency.

However, the changing security landscape demands a re-evaluation of the VDG framework. While terrorism has declined significantly compared to the turbulent 1990s, sporadic attacks and emerging security challenges persist. This makes it imperative that VDGs are not treated as a static policy tool but as a dynamic system requiring constant oversight, training, and modernization.

Defensive preparedness must go hand in hand with clear standard operating procedures, periodic refresher courses, and strict accountability mechanisms. Without these safeguards, the very objective of community security can be undermined.

VDGs must operate in close coordination with the police and other security agencies. Any ambiguity in roles or authority can lead to confusion during critical situations. Clear reporting structures and real-time communication channels are essential to ensure that VDGs complement, rather than complicate, formal security operations.

Equally important is the social dimension. VDGs function within tight-knit village ecosystems where trust and harmony are vital. Any perception of bias, exclusion, or politicization can fracture community relations. Therefore, transparency in selection, inclusivity, and sensitivity to local dynamics must remain central to the policy.

The state also bears responsibility for the welfare and morale of VDG members. Adequate honorariums, insurance coverage, and legal protection are not incentives but necessities for citizens who shoulder security responsibilities alongside their daily livelihoods.

Ultimately, Village Defence Groups should be viewed not as a substitute for state security forces, but as a supporting pillar rooted in community resilience. With proper training, regulation, and oversight, VDGs can continue to serve as a vital link between the state and citizens. Without reform, however, they risk becoming an outdated instrument in a rapidly changing security environment.

The way forward lies in strengthening governance, not merely arming villages-because true security flows from trust, preparedness, and responsible participation.

From Displacement to Legacy: A Life Dedicated to Social Justice in J&K

■ DR. SUSHIL K. SHARMA



As I sit down to write, four years after he left us, the feeling is still one of profound personal loss, not just for our family, but for a community and a region that he considered his extended home. Yashpal Sharma Saheb, as he was popularly known, was more than a former Member of the Legislative Council; he was a steadfast pillar of strength, a quiet philosopher of public service, and the compass that guided not only me, but countless others.

Born in Rawalkot (now in PoJK) in 1946 and uprooted by the storms of 1947, he carried the pain of displacement not as a burden, but as a motivation to rebuild not just his own life, but the lives of countless others finding refuge in camps. He embodied a profound lesson that a home is not just a place you live in, but a place you help create for others. While I chose the path of healing hearts through medicine, he dedicated himself to healing the social fabric through empathy, justice, and tireless advocacy.

Educated in law at the University of Jammu, he was deeply influenced by thinkers who spoke of equality and justice. It was a conviction he often reflected upon in later life that "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought." This belief animated his most defining moment, the landmark 1978 Poonch Agitation. Leadership was not a role he sought; it was entrusted to him by a generation seething under systemic unfairness and the denial of equal opportunity. He stood with them, faced immense pressure, and with remarkable moral courage, ensured that merit triumphed over patronage. This was more than a local victory; it was a restoration of faith for thousands of families. As the noted regional historian, Shri K.D. Maini, has documented in his work 'Poonch: The Battlefield of Kashmir', this movement was a watershed in the socio-political awakening of educated youth, with Yashpal Sharma as its quiet yet resolute architect. The agitation's resonance, however, revealed deeper structural grievances. The respected political analyst Shri Balraj Puri noted it was "a spontaneous protest in the whole of Jammu region, which indicates a deeper problem. It was not merely a protest against a loss of an innocent young life or against the alleged irregularity in the recruitment of teachers in Poonch district. The intensity of pop-



ular reaction only indicates that the discontent was much deeper." Its historical significance was further cemented when it led to the appointment of the Justice Sikri Commission, which formally acknowledged discrimination and favoritism in development, employment, and education across regions - a finding later corroborated by Shri Jagmohan, Former Governor of J&K, in his reflections on regional imbalances.

His formal political journey, as President of the Poonch Municipal Council and later as an MLC, was characterized by a relentless focus on urban development, sanitation, and civic amenities. Yet, his true impact was forged in the personal realm through listening patiently to the grievances of the marginalized, visiting to remote hamlets, and ensuring that the whispers of the unheard became voices

in the corridors of power. This earned him the affectionate titles of Chacha and Sher-e-Poonch.

In a political landscape often vacillating between narrow parochial interests at the altar of ethics, his ethos was centred on people, not power. He navigated the complexities of Jammu and Kashmir politics with a rare commitment to consensus and community harmony, even during periods of intense duress in the form of ceasefire violations, terrorism, and major security operations like Sarpyvash. His credibility across communities was most strikingly demonstrated in the 1983, 1996, 2002, and 2008 assembly elections, most notably the 2002 assembly elections, where he secured approximately 27,000 votes in a constituency with only 9,000 Hindu and Sikh voters.

In his later years, he turned his focus to preserving the cultural and religious heritage of Poonch, which had suffered due to turmoil on the borders, terrorism and neglect. He spearheaded the renovation of ancient temples-Bagachi Temple, Nath Ji Temple, Gita Bhavan, Khakha Naban-and most notably, the construction of the iconic Nav Greh Temple, now a centre of faith and spiritual tourism. He also built community halls, notable among them being the Dashnami Akhara Community Hall, which stands as a physical testament to his vision of creating spaces for social cohesion. His efforts towards cultural reclamation have emerged as hubs for social and religious gatherings, and as centers of healing in a borderland marked by turmoil.

To me, he was like the venerable Deodar tree of our Himalayas, deeply rooted in the soil of Poonch, unyielding against the harshest winds, and offering shelter and solace to all in need. At home, he was simplicity personified. His greatest lessons were silent-a life of integrity, an ear for the unheard, and a heart that never measured help by caste or creed. Even during my medical journey, his advice was always the same: "Serve as if every patient is family."

The void his departure created is permanent, yet so is the light he kindled. He showed us that leadership is about lifting others, that faith is built through action, and that the truest legacy is a life dedicated to the service of others.

As his younger brother, and on behalf of our family, I extend my deepest gratitude to everyone who loved him, worked with him, and keeps his memory alive. Your stories of his kindness are the greatest tribute to his life.

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Saving our shrinking forest

■ GL KHAJURIA



The forest is a peculiar organism of unlimited kindness and benevolence that makes no demands for its sustenance but extends protection to all beings offering shade even to the axe man who fells it Lord Buddha.

After independence, the Indian Forest policy was framed in 1952 wherein it was categorically enunciated that India would have 33% of the geographical area under the forests. But ironically, as per survey of Indian's latest report (2015), we continue to have 21% of forests despite population explosion, increased biotic pressure accruing from grazing, encroachments and diversification of forest land for multi-disciplinary purposes. As such, there have been a marginal increase of 1% forest cover.

The overall situation is that the total green covers now stands for 697888 sq mm (21.23%) of the geographical area and upto 5871 sq km (0.92%) from 92,027 sq km as had earlier been existing in the year 2011. As such, there has been a marginal increase of just 31sq km in very dense forest, whereas moderately dense forest went down to 1991 sq km and the open forest accounted for 7831 sq mm.

As per Anmol Kumar, the Director General of Forest Survey of India, the carbon stocks of the country have increased by 4.07% whereas the regeneration capacity is around 48% of the total recorded forest area. It has further been reported that West Bengal and Odisha are in the top slot having forest cover followed by Kerala, Uttarkhand, Bihar and Tamil Nadu. The North-Eastern region accounts for one fourth of the green cover showing thereby a periodic decrease



which of course is a matter of utmost concern.

The survey report reveals further that 257 Sq.km of eastern states of the country have mostly been effected arguably owing to shifting cultivation practices . Nagaland with 274 Sqkm is in the forefront followed by Tripura (111 Sqkm), Manipura (100 Sqkm), Arunachal Pradesh (89 Sqkm) and Misoram (63 Sq Km) and amongst other states, Andhra Pradesh has lost the forest cover to the extent of 273 SqKm, Madhya Pradesh (178 Sq Kms), Karnataka (62 SqKms) and Chhatisgarh (53 Sq Kms) of the geographical areas. The Jammu and Kashmir state having a forest cover of 20,230 Hectare (recorded) out of 22, 539 Hectare (Actual). This shows the recorded percentages of the area having per capita forest cover around (0.1796 Hae) ending year 2011 which is dismally jeering.

In view of the seriousness and sensibility accru-

ing from the overall declining forest cover, the scenario is unambiguously dismaying.

And in the same vein, the situation worldwide is also alarming. The scientists, environmentalists and the policy planners around the world are awfully worried about as per the presently prevailing scenario. In a situation like this and if it continues to be the same, there is impending apprehensions of further environmental degradation, tantamounts to cataclysm. A clear cut death Knell signal for all the nations if the world.

At this crucial juncture, it is utmost warren for rapid planning and action able strategies to be put in place well before the holocaustic scenario overshadows this planet and its diversified biodiversity.

Over the years, lot of summits and the conferences have deliberated upon right from stock holm on human development in 1972 followed

by earth summit in Rio de Janerio (Brazil) and then earth summit in Johannesburg but in the ultimate analysis, all have proved to be unyielding. In the ongoing process of such summits, conventions, year 1995 unfolded another convention held in Berlin (COPI), wherein it became apparent that Rio was not enough and even in its after math the results were quite unyielding. This was sequenced by a protocol on climate change convention adopted in 1997, known as Kyoto-protocol. The targeted moto was emphatically aimed at to bring down global CHG emission by 5.2% during the period 2008-2012 and its commitment expired ending 2015.

And now recently, a land mark framework agreement on climatic change was enunciated in Paris (2015) to keep and ensure global temperature slow down and this remarkable agreement followed as a sequel to united nations intergovernmental panel on climatic changes (IPCC) in association with world organisation (WHO) and UN Environment Programme (UNEP) scientific, technical and socio-economic information concerning to climate areas changes, its potential effects and opinions for adaptation and migration.

This framework was laid down on the occasion of world earth day (22nd April, 2016) where apart from US and China around 120 countries across the global participated. And this agreement was more relevant and of vital importance as a follow up for enforcement of draft treaty'adapted by around 195 countries present at United Nations climatic change conference. It is, therefore, expected that this world conference shall provide the required push in reducing global emissions, to extent of 55% by the most populating 55 countries.

Consequently, therefore, the signing of this agreement on climatic change, particularly when the most powerful countries viz US and China are in the lead is beyond doubt going to have a far reaching impact. This will rather change the glooming picture of the environment at large and shall provide impetus to the most magnanimous wordings of Margret Mead which go as such, " never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizen can change the world, indeed it is the only that ever has."

It is therefore, prudent to throw light on some of the very vital issues of the day and ensure their world wide implementation on larger scale.

Averting deforestation. Our existing forest cover is frazzling rapidly with the revolving wheel of time and its further declination shall have to be averted by all the nations across the globe.

Invigorating extensive/intensive afforestation. This shall have to be ensured on gigantic scales as the losses we have already done are not so easily retrievable. And in doing so, we shall have to start from hills/ mountainous tops as these have doubtlessly become more sensitive and fragile and are subject to denudation and huge land mass movements in the shape of landslides, floods fury on an unprecedented scale. So unless our tops are safe , the low lying areas shall always be in peril. While celebrating earth day in 2015, it was pledged to plant 7.8 billion saplings worldwide to account for every single person living on earth in a lead upto 50th anniversary of earth day in 2020. Where on the same earth such pledge has so far been initiated ? This invites special attention of the world leaders.

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Rationale Behind Chanting Mantras 108 times

■ PUPUJI KOUL

It is not only in Hinduism or Sanatan Dharma that mantras are chanted 108 times but it is almost universal as in other cultures as well it is so. In fact, there are always 108 beads in the Japa Mala -called as "prayer beads." There is some significance and meaning in chanting mantras 108 times. The, moot question is what is the rationale behind having 108 beads in amala and chanting of mantras 108 times and it is not confined to Hinduism only but it is so across cultures and traditions. Everyone knows it that mantras are chanted 108 times and rosary always has only 108 beads but do not know why it is so? We should at least have the elementary knowledge about why it is so? We should know the doctrine/principle behind having 108 beads in a rosary and about chanting mantras 108 times. It is not only or special in Hinduism or Sanatan Dharma that mantras are chanted 108 times, but it is so across the cultures and traditions. Let us know the rationale behind chanting mantras 108 times. Mantras are commonly chanted 108 times because of the significance of 108. In fact chanting mantras 108 times is a practice rooted in the number's significance in cosmology, astrology, and spiritual traditions, particularly in Hinduism and Buddhism, rather than being universal across all cultures. This repetition is believed to align an individual's energy with cosmic rhythms and promote spiritu-

al transformation through connections to cosmic distances, astrological calculations, yogic energy lines, sacred texts, and numbers symbolism. Have you ever wondered why mantras are traditionally repeated 108 times? Normally it is traditional because to delve into all of the reasons why mantras are changed 108 times is kinda nerdy, and to some people, kinda woo-woo and it is like to keep things fact-based, evidence-based, and rational when it is working with the therapeutic power of sound and mantra. However, to satisfy our curiosity it is at least helpful to understand the "why" of the number 108. And the "why" of the number 54 for the Christian rosary. The rational for chanting mantras 108 times is based on a combination of spiritual, cosmological and physiological beliefs, such as the number 108 connecting the Earth, Sun, and Moon, representing a significant number of energy lines in the body, and symbolizing spiritual completeness. It is considered a tool for purification and for bringing the practitioner into harmony with the vibrations of the universe. Following are the reasons behind chanting mantras 108 times-1-Spiritual & Cosmological Reasons-a-Cosmic connection--The distance between the earth and the sun and earth and moon is said to be approximately 108 times their respective diameters.-b-Spiritual path--Some traditions believe there are 108 energy lines, or nadis, that converge in the heart chakra, and chanting

ng 108 times helps activate these channels.-c-Spiritual completeness-In some paths, there are 108 defilements or obstacles to overcome on the path to enlightenment, making the repetition tool for purification.-d-Symbolic digits-The digits 1,0,8 can represent "one" [God or the individual], "nothing" [emptiness or zero], and "everything" [infinity], symbolising the journey from the individual to everything.

2-Physiological reasons-a-Marma points---According to Ayurveda, the human body has 108 vital points of life force called marma points, and chanting a mantra 108 times is thought to activate or balance these points.-b-Breathing cycle-One theory suggests the number is derived from approximate number of breaths a person takes in 12-hour period[10,800], with 108 being a simplified, practical number to represent these cycles.

How it works in practice---a--Focus and meditation-Repeating a mantra 108 times provides a structured and meditative practice to help the practitioner stay focussed and mindful. --b---Transformational effect-The consistent repetition is believed to have a transformational effect, helping to clear blockages and bring about self-realisation. -c-Mala Beads-A Japa mala is a string of 108 beads, with special "guru bead" to help practitioners count each repetition and guide them through the process.

We have often heard our elders saying

that the Mantras must be chanted 108 times but have you ever heard about the reason behind the same? Mantra has been portrayed as a consecrated expression or numinous sound, most punctual mantras took birth in India more than 3,000 years back and were created in Vedic Sanskrit. Reciting mantras has the ability to change psyche, body, and soul. Chanting mantras 108 times is a sacred practice in many traditions, believed to deepen focus, improve spiritual connection, and bring about transformative effects. The number 108 holds cosmic and spiritual significance, appearing in contexts like number of Upanishads, 108 marma points in the human body, and astronomical distance related to the sun, moon and earth. Using a mala with 108 beads is a common tool for keeping count and ensuring each mantra is completed with focus. There are said to be 108 Upanishads and 108 primary sacred places -Shakti Pithas in Hinduism. There is astrological significance of chanting mantras 108 times. There are 12 zodiac signs and nine planets, which multiply to 108-[9x 12 = 108]. The Sanskrit alphabet has 54 letters, each with both a masculine and feminine aspect [Shiva and Shakti], which multiplies to 108 [54x2==108].

There are several benefits of chanting 108 times-a-Deepens focus-The repetition helps to quiet the mind and improve concentration-b-Fosters mindfulness---Following a count through a japa mala or

without it increases mindfulness during practice. ---c--- Creates sacred resonance-The repetition is believed to create a powerful, sacred resonance that can invite blessings. -Aids in spiritual growth-It is believed to be a path to spiritual transformation and alignment with cosmic energies. -d-Connects with universal vibrations---The practice helps practitioners connect with the fundamental vibrations of the cosmos. 108 has long been revered in Buddhism, Hinduism, yoga, and even ancient geometry and mathematics, however, its exact meaning is up for debate. It has been one of the most venerated numbers for thousands of years due to its prominence in spiritual, astrological, numerical, and metaphysical fields. Malas or prayer beads, are used for meditation and mantra repetition in Hindu and yogic traditions. They typically consist of 108 beads plus an extra guru bead that is positioned apart from the main loop, making the mala a string of 108 plus 1 bead. The japa malas aid practitioners in staying focused as they cycle through 108 recitations of a mantra. In, yogic tradition, the number appears repeatedly. There are said to be 108 peethas-sacred sites -spread across India, 108 Upanishads, and 108 marmapoints, or vital regions of the human body. Within the body, yogic philosophy states that 108 nadis or energy channels converge in the heart [the Anahata chakra]. One, of these, the

sushumna, is believed to lead towards self-realisation. Then the nine planets-the Sun, Moon, Mars, Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Rahu, and Ketu-are thought to govern the natural order, wearing a mala is thought to help counteract the effects of these celestial bodies. The 108 mala beads have several chakra-related theories, one of 108 energy lines that connect to the heart centre is thought to be the path to spiritual enlightenment, in many mantra practice traditions, the extra 100 repetitions signify completion. Geometry also reflects this pattern. On the Sri Yantra, there are 54 intersections where three lines meet. Each point embodies both masculine [Shiva] and feminine [Shakti] qualities. Doubling them yields 108 points, believed to define both sacred diagrams and the human body. The significance of 108 has also been explored in mathematics. Galileo described the universe as written in "mathematical language" and many mystics believed numbers offered a key to deeper insight. Yoga traditions consider 108 such a key. Interestingly, a baseball has 108 stitches and in yoga, 108 symbolises spiritual completion. At the end we can say that apart from Hinduism and Yoga, Buddhism also gives number 108, profound significance. So, across Indian cosmology, astrology, spiritual texts, world religions, geometry, astronomy, and ancient numerics, the number 108 does appear again and again, and marks its presence strongly.

