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## Community Policing in Assam: A Study on the Role of Village Defence Organization

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### Abstract

Community policing is a philosophy of how to involve community people in policing activities. Involving community people in policing activities has many advantages as it will empower people to participate in the policing activities, reduce the workload of police, reduction of crime and maintenance of law and order. In the context of the present study, the Village Defence Organization (VDO) in Assam is facilitating community policing services and through this paper, the researcher tries to explore the range of activities conducted by the Village Defence Organization (VDO), to what extent they are socially responsible and the challenges faced by them.

#### *Objectives:*

- To analyse the concept of community policing.
- To examine the role of the Village Defence Organization (VDO) in Assam.

#### *Research Method*

The researcher has used the descriptive cum analytical method while writing this paper. Data are collected from both primary and secondary sources. For the primary source, the researcher interviewed 240 members of village defence parties from three districts in Assam namely- Nagaon, Golaghat and Barpeta districts and used a simple random sampling method by taking 80 samples from each district. Secondary data are collected from books, journals and government reports relevant to the study.

**Keywords:** Community policing, Village Defence Organization (VDO), Social Responsibility.

## **Introduction**

Community policing is about police engagement with the community through restructuring police organizations and altering the daily activities of operational police officers (Segrave and Ratcliffe, 2004). Community policing is a major paradigm shift from the 'professional' model of policing with its emphasis on expertise and a centralised bureaucratic command structure to an inclusive philosophy that promotes community-based problem-solving strategies and promotes partnerships between the police and communities in a collaborative effort to solve crime and disorder (Fleming 2000). Community policing in the true sense is a micro-level concept because, to a large extent, it seeks political and community relationships at a local level. It strategically utilizes a target group of local inhabitants and trains them to work together for community purposes.

Community policing is thus a collaborative approach between police and community and thus focuses on building positive relationships, open communication, and trust between the law enforcement agencies and people. This is a 'bottom-up' approach where the views of the communities are taken into consideration and they can directly participate in the administration. They have to report police information related to crime, suspect elements in the society and occurrence of any untoward incidents. The members of the community are provided ad hoc power to nab the criminals if possible and they are allowed to resolve petty offences so that excessive workload on police could be reduced.

In the history of community policing in India, the Village Defence Organization (VDO) in Assam has been playing a crucial role in maintaining social harmony and the development of society. The organization was formed seven decades back in 1949 by the Late Harinarayan Baruah, a visionary leader of the Jorhat district in Assam committing social reconstruction and development of Assam. Though the nature of crime was not so much complex during his time he felt the need for such an organization which could help the police administration in maintaining law and order and other welfare activities.

The Village Defence Organization (VDO) is a voluntary organization having its constitutional mandate formed under the Village Defence Act, of 1966 which was amended by the Assam government in the 2024 winter session of the state Legislative Assembly. The organization has 25 members with one Secretary, one President and Nayak. The Secretary of VDO usually represents their issues at district and state level.

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Apart from this as per the Provisions of Village Defence Organization Act, 1966 four advisory committees are formed to streamline and effective functioning of the organization. They are known as the District Advisory Committee, Sub-divisional Advisory Committee, Thana Advisory Committee and Primary Committee. As of now in Assam, there are 22,881 registered Village defence parties and 3106 are unregistered parties dedicated to serving the cause of the society having no any individual interest.

While observing the functioning of the organization, they carry out night patrolling in the village with the local police. The researcher observes that the night patrolling of Village defence parties helps in the reduction of crime and the maintenance of law and order. The researcher while interviewing with many members of the village defence organization, said, "Sir, in our village we formed Village defence parties in 2016 and since then we have been able to reduce theft, and dacoity in our village." The members of village defence parties also act as an informers to the police by reporting the crime suspects and incidents of crime so that police could do further investigation and prevent them. The philosophy of community policing also states that every policeman is a common man with uniform and every common man is police without uniform.

The members of the village defence organization also take the initiative to organize social awareness campaigning and meetings in the village with the help of the police administration. Child marriage, drug abuse, cybercrime, witch-hunting, ignorance of human rights, and illiteracy are some of the issues with where village defence organizations have received exemplary success. For instance, in 2022 the VDP members lodged 1774 numbers of FIRs against child marriage across all the districts in Assam.

The VDP members also work as an important unit of blood donors by saving lakhs of people in Assam. Under the leadership of the honourable CM of Assam, Dr Himanta Biswa Sharma the VDP members actively participated in the massive plantation of trees i.e. one crore under Amrit Brikha Andolan for sustainable development and ecological balance. They also act as a security worker and help police administration in the smooth functioning of board examinations. During election time, their presence is unavoidable in preparing the election booth. They also do regular patrolling on railway tracks, oil and pipeline.

Assam is an inhabitant of diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic people having their group assertion. Assam has witnessed much ethnic violence either for autonomy, separate states or demand for ST status. During this turmoil period, the VDP members

work to maintain communal harmony. As VDP members are people of the local community, they know their problem better than an outsider who recently joined in higher echelon of police administration in a district. They can easily identify the doubtful element that could disturb the peace and violate harmony and, in that case, the VDP members inform the local police administration to take action in time. They also provide information about missing or absconding people, make regular contact with family and share valid information.

The VDP members also provide assistance to the police administration in disaster management activities. Assam is a flood-affected state and each year's flood brings massive loss of property and lives of people. The VDP members work as an early warning mechanism with the direction issued from the district administration and rescue the needy. Not only this, they along with the district police administration also distribute food and essential goods in flood relief camps. As they are the first respondent of the community, they can inform the administration which area is severely affected and need more assistance. According to their information, the State Disasters Management Authority (SDMA) can take prompt action to help the flood-affected people.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the VDP members in cooperation with Assam police ignored their lives and family worked as a frontline warrior. The VDP members visited door to door of Assamese rural people and distributed masks and sanitiser to prevent further contamination of the pandemic. They also helped the district administration in the distribution of food and essential commodities. Not only this, the VDP members provided security services in the detention centre where people who came from other states and people with Corona-positive patients were kept. In interaction with the respondents, the researcher came to know that they also provide all possible assistance to other people such as old age, pregnant women and people who had suffered serious diseases to whom VDP members provide transportation facilities.

Despite praiseworthy work, the institution is encountered with many challenges. In interaction with the members of VDP, the researcher came to know that they did not receive the pocket money for the last two and half years. As per the Village Defence Act, 1966 the members of VDP should receive pocket money and the Assam government in 2018 declared that the VDP members will receive pocket money for ₹ 2500 but still yet to receive and dedicatedly provide services for the greater interest of the society. The researcher also views that the VDP members need physical training and it should be provided by the government. As per the norms of the Village Defence Act, 1966, VDP

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members have to receive one lantern, lathi, flute, mosquito net, torch, uniform, I-Card, and whistle for patrolling at night, but due to the changing nature of the violent crime, if VDP members provide physical training then they could find easy to nab a culprit. This is also required for their personal safety and security. In interaction with the respondents, they also expressed the same because there are many instances where the members of the village defence organization were physically injured when they faced confrontation with thieves and dacoit. The researcher met many respondents of VDO who even did not receive uniform, I-Card and other elements. Many members of the village defence organization also expressed that they sometimes fear interacting with some of the police officials because of their rude behaviour but the researcher observes that the number of such police personnel is meagre in size.

As per the provisions of the Assam Village Defence Act, 1966 a Circle Organizer of Village Defence Organization (COVDO) should be appointed in each police station. The COVDO works as a liaison of communication between police and VDP members and also provides instruction to the VDP on how they should work. However in the field study, the researcher observes that in the Barpeta district there is not sufficient number of COVDO which hinders in proper functioning of the village defence organization. Moreover, the researcher also observes the absence of a strong state committee of VDO which could raise their issues at the state level.

In interaction with the respondents, another issue raised by the members of VDO i.e. age of the respondents. As per the provisions of the Assam Village Defence Act, 1966 the age of the members should not be more than 50 years but the researcher met many respondents who are at the age of 50 and they want to serve the society through VDO after 50 years of age. Hence, the researcher feels that the age bar should be amended as it is a voluntary organization so that opportunity should be given to everyone to join in VDP who wants to do something for the society.

Lastly, the researcher believes that for effective community policing, the proactive approach taken by the police is important because, without the invitation of police, community people cannot take part in the policing activities. The community policing approach will reduce much of the workload on police and it is expected that through their harmonious relationship, people can expect better policing service in coming days.

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