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## A salute to frontline villagers of Ladakh

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**T**HE Army installed a statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj on the banks of Pangong Tso lake in eastern Ladakh over a month ago. Even as the event sparked a debate, it prompted me to take a walk down memory lane.

In the mid-1970s, as a young officer, I was in Ladakh for advanced mountain warfare training in the rugged, glaciated region. A few years later, I returned as part of the Special Forces, deployed at Lukung post on the western tip of Pangong Tso lake at an altitude of 14,300 feet. Lukung is one of the three border villages in the area; the others are Phobrang and Urung. These habitats lie in the valley with large grazing grounds, crisscrossed by streamlets and overlooked by the lofty peaks of the Karakoram range.

Phobrang, which is nearest to the border, acted as a staging camp for our long-range patrols towards Tsogtsalu-Hot Springs areas. There was a close bond between the Army and locals, especially the youth. We played volleyball and football. Devoid of basic amenities at that time, the life of villagers was extremely hard.

I left Lukung in the late 1970s with a heavy heart, hoping to come back. I did return as the Commanding Officer after over a decade. On completing the Siachen tenure, my battalion was deployed in the Chushul sector; Phobrang was in the unit's area of responsibility. The number of hamlets had swelled, but the area remained underdeveloped. We undertook civic action programmes to improve the condition of the lone school and provide medical facilities to residents. The unit's ice hockey team honed its skills by playing with local players, who were outstanding. After a year, when the battalion de-inducted, the send-off was marked by heartwarming 'Julley' greetings. This is the Ladakhi word for hello, welcome, thank you or even goodbye.

Now, as an academic, I get to meet students from border areas where I served. This keeps me connected with locals. Konchok Stobgais, current head of Phobrang village, runs a weaving centre and camping site at Lukung. The Indian government's Vibrant Villages Programme, although a belated response to the Chinese model villages (Xiaokang) project, is expected to be a boon for the natives of border areas.

While undertaking developmental projects, residents' inputs and sentiments must be given due consideration. The installation of Shivaji's statue led to discontent among locals as it was perceived to be an imposition. Instead, eulogising a local hero would have been a far more prudent move.

Villages like Phobrang not only define India's geographic boundaries but also the spirit of the nation. Its residents have stood shoulder to shoulder with the Army, be it during the 1962 Chinese aggression or the intrusions by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in recent years. They often confront PLA soldiers in the disputed territory. The nation should express its gratitude to them through an outreach initiative, 'Julley Phobrang', on the lines of the 'Julley Ladakh' programme of the Navy.