Review Article

Border Villages as Strategic Nodes: Enhancing Cross-Border Vigilance and Security Development Along the Indian Border with China

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Abstract

The Line of Actual Control (LAC) has been tense recently, with the fiercest border conflict since 1962 at Galwan Valley in 2020. Despite extensive talks, trust is absent on both sides. Apart from infrastructural development and military buildup, new methods of increasing vigilance are being used by both, which include building Xiaokang or 'well-off villages' from the Chinese side and rehabilitating border villages by the Indian side. Indian border villages have historically held strategic importance but have become depopulated due to limited opportunities, leaving them as 'ghost villages.' India is working to support these villages and counter Chinese tactics to maintain territorial integrity. India can improve security and bilateral cooperation by leveraging the strategic and socio-economic potential of these villages. This paper examines the importance of border villages as hubs for cross-border surveillance and security measures amid geopolitical tensions, border conflicts, and broader security concerns. It aims to understand how these villages can promote peace, prosperity, and resilience in the Indo-China border region and provide policy recommendations for their development, thereby maintaining peace in contested border areas.
Keywords: border villages, LAC, gray-zone warfare, ghost villages, Xiaokang villages, Himalayan border.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, as both neighbours reach new heights of growth, a healthy relationship between New Delhi and Beijing is necessary for a prosperous and peaceful region. Unfortunately, the relationship between the two growing superpowers in the region is hostile, and mistrust is prevalent. Lidarev (2022) argues that China and India are competitors whose rivalry will significantly shape Asia's trajectory in the 21st century. In 2020, a conflict arose between the military forces of China and India along their border. Pangong Lake and the Galwan Valley were the two points where tensions were very high. The tensions escalated due to divergences regarding Indian infrastructure initiatives (Philip, 2020). For the first time in 45 years, the clashes resulted in fatalities, retreats and gunfire along the LAC (Som, 2020; Gettleman, 2020). India and China both began enhancing their border infrastructure. Many other skirmishes were observed between the two in various other areas. For example, on May 10, 2020, a minor skirmish occurred between two forces in Mouthing, Naku La, Sikkim (Peri, 2020), and skirmishes also took place near the Ladakhi village of Chushul on 29-30 August (Pandit, 2020).

Following the skirmishes along the LAC, both nations began rapidly developing infrastructure along the border. The Indian government, which previously worked cautiously to avoid disturbing the peace in the region, has now begun working openly and more proactively to strengthen its strategic capabilities. India transferred an additional 12,000 workers to border regions to aid in completing road projects and announced an up to 170% increase in the minimum wage for workers along the India-China border (Singh & Choudhury, 2020; Chaturvedi, 2020). The development of the LAC is proceeding at a faster pace from the Indian side than ever before.

In the development of the border region, villages with significant strategic advantages near the border should not be ignored. Unfortunately, the Indian side has not been proactive in developing these villages. These villages often lie in or near contested regions where both countries claim territory. Through the

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establishment and settlement of these villages, each country strengthens its presence and asserts its sovereignty in these territories. The strategic importance of these villages for national security is discussed and analysed in detail later in the paper. Given the increasing military infrastructure on both sides, such as the construction of roads, airstrips, and military outposts by both India and China, this border villages could be strategically important. This paper examines the strategic roles of border villages, assesses their impact on national security, and explores their potential to promote bilateral relations. This research aims to offer policymakers guidance on optimising border management strategies and community development in sensitive regions.

2. Historical Context and Contemporary Border Villages
2.1 Historical Overview
The past conflicts between India and China have mainly centred around boundary issues, with the most significant confrontation being the Sino-Indian War of 1962. During this fight, China successfully seized control of 38,000 sq. km of Aksai Chin (Prakash, 2021, p. 65). Additional confrontations occurred, such as the Nathu La and Cho La incidents in 1967, during which Indian forces effectively defended against Chinese invasions. Furthermore, the Sumdorong Chu standoff in 1987 concluded without significant conflict following diplomatic negotiations. These incidents have greatly influenced the current border tensions between the two nations.

The main areas of disagreement between India and China are Aksai Chin in the western sector, which is controlled by China but claimed by India as part of Ladakh; Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern sector, which China claims as part of South Tibet, Barahoti region in Uttarakhand, more minor disputes along the Sikkim border; and Doklam, a trijunction of India, China and Bhutan, which experienced a major standoff in 2017 (Chengappa & Krishnan, 2017). These locations have played a crucial role in the ongoing border tensions and confrontations between the two nations.

If we talk of their strategic importance, Tawang, situated in Arunachal Pradesh, held great strategic importance because of its proximity to the border and its

high height, which allowed for a clear vantage point over the surrounding regions (Rao, 2023). Chushul, in Ladakh, played a crucial role as a supply route and observation position. It witnessed two significant battles - Gurung Hill and Rezang La. The villagers there supported Indian troops by transporting essential provisions to high-altitude outposts (Samota, 2023). This assistance was crucial, as the rugged terrain and high altitude posed significant difficulties for the army in transporting provisions. The villagers' efforts helped maintain the combat effectiveness of the forces, allowing them to protect strategic locations such as Rezang La and Gurung Hill (S. V. Singh, 2022; FP Staff, 2020). Despite often being overlooked, their actions were crucial in enabling the Indian Army to maintain its defensive operations in the Chushul area throughout the wars.

2.2 Depopulation and 'Ghost Villages'
As Wang and Garduno-Rivera (2021) claim, 'while highly relevant to policy-making, economics has seldom focused on border areas', similar is the case in the Indian context (p. 6). Indian policymakers long overlooked the development and conservation of these border villages. The lack of livelihoods and opportunities has forced the border communities to move to nearby cities and towns to access basic amenities. The reasons for this abandonment of villages are several, but the decreasing cultivable land is one of the major ones. Climate change has also had an adverse effect throughout the Himalayan border states. The unusual rainfall pattern and depleting water resources are also among the primary reasons in many villages, especially in Ladakh and Uttarakhand.

A significant number of villages lack vital amenities, including access to roads, power, and healthcare services. The depopulation of border villages in India, especially in states like Uttarakhand, which shares a 350 km-long border with China, is a significant concern. For reference, a report emphasised that among the 734 deserted villages in Uttarakhand, 660 lacked a Primary Health Centre, 482 had no road connectivity, and 399 were more than 1 km from a source of drinking water (Joshi, 2018). From 2011 to 2018, more than 185 villages in three border districts of Uttarakhand were officially designated as totally depopulated and are commonly referred to as 'ghost villages' (Kullashri, 2022b).
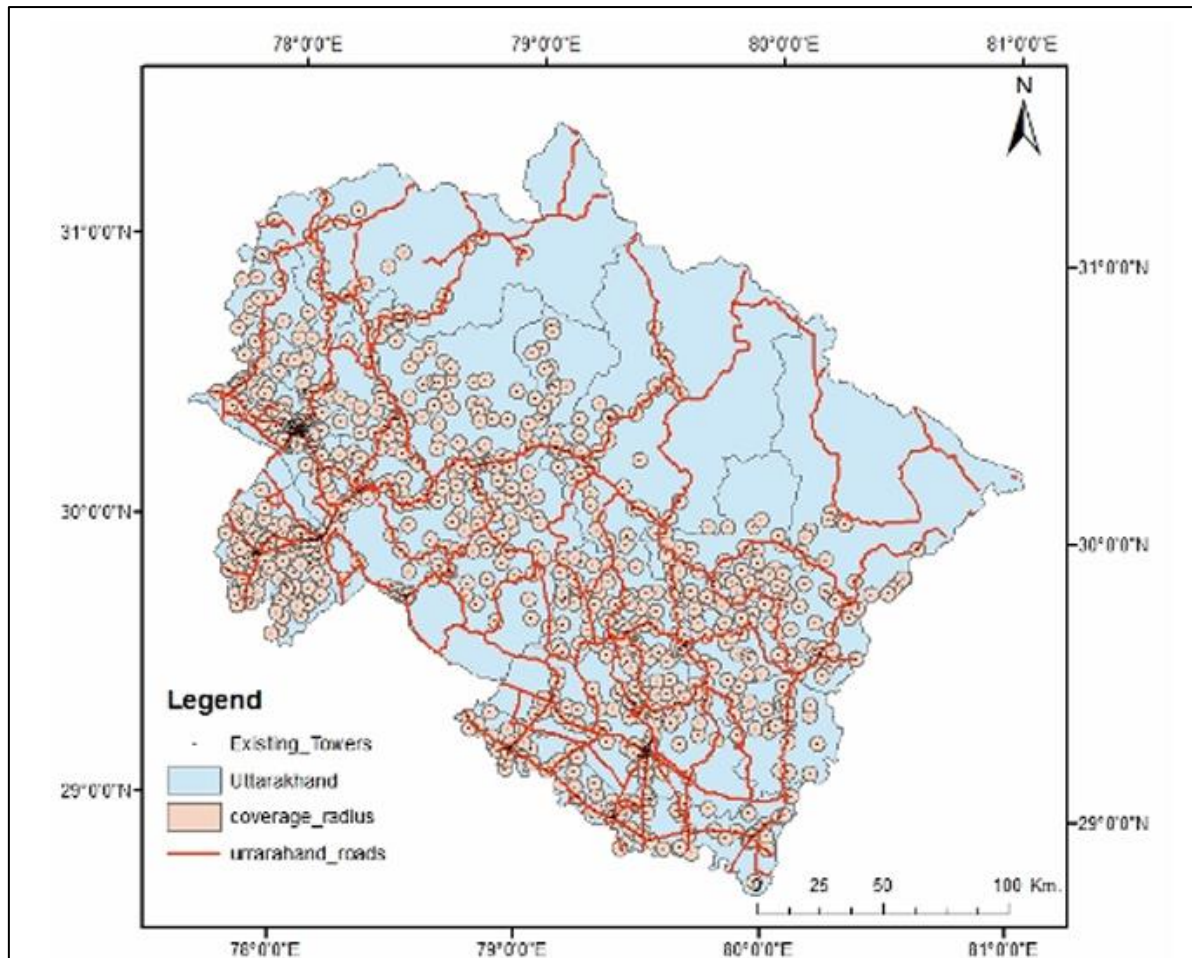
Figure 1: Low intensity of Mobile towers & connectivity in the state of Uttarakhand along the LAC
(Source: Tayal *et al.,* 2018, p. 5)

The same is the case with Arunachal Pradesh: approximately 2,70,000 individuals, who account for 20% of the state's entire population, live in approximately 1,600 settlements located in the 41 border blocks (ETV Bharat, 2022). Border settlements in the state are shrinking as people are migrating from the 1,125 km-long borders shared with China. Due to this migration in Arunachal Pradesh, many high-altitude border settlements have turned into ghost villages. In 2014, the Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, Lt Gen Nirbhay Sharma (Retd), wrote a letter to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) to bring attention to the thinning of the border. In the letter, he noted:

"The issue needs to be addressed urgently or else, apart from a constant threat of ingress, gradual assimilation of our area by China is along the cards, on the lines already witnessed in North Myanmar…… Consequently, there is a thinning out of the border population which comes down to the lower heights to seek better opportunities" (Baruah, 2014).

The border villages of Sikkim have also experienced a gradual decrease in their population. Theengh *et al.,* (2023) link this to restricted economic prospects, the absence of basic utilities, and severe living conditions (p. 157). The depopulation of border villages, especially in the Kinnaur and Lahaul-Spiti districts of Himachal Pradesh, has also become an increasingly worrisome issue. Emigration from these regions is primarily due to a lack of economic opportunities and amenities, as in other states.

The Ladakh region has experienced substantial farmland abandonment due to multiple factors, including water scarcity, the transition from agriculture to tourism, and environmental constraints. Villages such as Kulum in Leh and Kumik in Zanskar have been deserted as a result of a lack of water. In Ladakh, the number of tourists has increased significantly, growing from 16,449 in 1994 (Singh, 2021) to around 531,396 in 2022 (IBEF, 2024). The region is an ecologically sensitive zone and is known as a cold desert with limited water access. The influx of tourists has depleted the already scarce resources, impacting the local population. Increased military presence and infrastructure development in the contested Himalayan region have also led to the loss of grazing lands and a sense of insecurity for herders. Thus, locals are requesting alternative land and housing far from the border (Hassan, 2021).

3. Strategic Relevance in the Past and the Present

General Bipin Rawat has also emphasised that migration along the border can have significant ramifications for national security (PNS, 2021). We have to remember that these border villages were of utmost importance during the 1962 Indo-China War, as they served as essential supply lines and observation points throughout the conflict. The border villages were crucial for logistical support, serving as routes for transporting important resources such as supplies, ammunition, and reinforcements to the front lines. Due to the challenging terrain and lack of infrastructure, these villages were essential for maintaining supply routes. Rural populations often supplied nearby military forces with essential provisions, such as food and shelter. The local people's knowledge of the terrain and weather conditions was vital for planning and executing military operations.

Border villages around the world, such as Panmunjom in the DMZ between North and South Korea, Nahal Oz near the Gaza Strip, and communities near the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir, serve as crucial sites for surveillance and monitoring activities. They offer strategic vantage points for observing and responding to actions across borders. It is not only the village or the land that helps the troops maintain an advantageous position, but also the invaluable support of the locals. India had wars with two neighbours in the past, Pakistan and China, and there are numerous cases where locals proved beneficial and have somehow contributed to changing the course of the war.

- During the 1962 Sino-Indian War, two local Monpa girls, Sela and Nura, supported Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat by supplying him with food and ammunition as he defended against the Chinese army for 72 hours. Sela Pass and Sela Lake in Arunachal Pradesh are named after Sela, and Nuranang Falls, also known as Jang Falls, is named after Nura in honour of their bravery.
- Ranchordas Pagi, also known as Ranchhod Rabari, played a significant role in the Indian Army during the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pakistani conflicts due to his exceptional tracking skills. He was honoured by Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, who named a border station after him (IADN, 2021). Pagi's services were so significant that he received a personal invitation to a celebratory dinner after the 1971 conflict.

These are just two examples; the role of locals has been crucial throughout history and even today, the LoC is a tested example. Local individuals play a vital role in providing essential information regarding the movements of adversaries and any dubious activity. During the Kargil War in 1999, local shepherds played a crucial role in notifying the Indian Army of infiltrators.

The border villages along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China hold significant strategic importance for several reasons:

- a) **Territorial Claims and Sovereignty**: In disputed areas, these villages bolster each country's presence and sovereignty, serving as a tangible demonstration of control. China's establishment of villages along its contested borders with India and Bhutan is perceived as a tactic to validate its territorial assertions. Border communities often represent a nation's cultural and historical connections to a particular area (Chaudhury, 2021). These linkages bolster territorial claims, emphasising the indigenous population's enduring presence and deep-rooted connection to the land.

- b) **Military and Dual-Use Infrastructure**: Many of these villages are designed with dual-use infrastructure, serving both civilian and military purposes. This allows for rapid deployment of troops and military equipment if needed, enhancing strategic readiness (Jun & Hart, 2024). We will discuss this in detail further in the paper.

- c) **Surveillance and Intelligence**: The presence of civilian populations in these villages is a natural surveillance mechanism. Residents can report unusual activities, reducing the need for extensive military surveillance. We already have many examples and cases in the paper. The locals' knowledge and familiarity with the terrain are very strategic for the forces. Kullashri (2022b) claims that using people as the primary surveillance instrument significantly reduces surveillance costs, as they are highly accurate in monitoring every part of the border.

- d) **Psychological Advantage**: The establishment of well-developed villages along the border can serve as a psychological deterrent to adversaries. It demonstrates a nation's commitment to defending its territory and can boost the morale of both the local population and the military. The presence and everyday experiences of the residents serve as a testament to the nation's cultural legacy and solidarity, cultivating a robust sense of national pride and belonging. Castelloe (2019) claims that civilians residing in border areas can serve as a psychological deterrent to potential aggressors. Awareness of the presence of inhabitants and their active defence can deter violent actions.

4. China's Gray Zone Strategy and the Role of Xiaokang Villages

4.1 Gray Zone Tactics

The 'Gray Zone' refers to an operational environment where aggressors employ ambiguity and non-attribution to accomplish strategic goals while

minimising counteractions from other nation-states. Within the grey zone, aggressors utilise hybrid tactics to achieve their strategic objectives (Chambers, 2016, p. 4; Azad et al., 2022, p. 85). Gray Zone strategy refers to a set of tactics states employ to achieve their objectives without crossing the threshold into open warfare. These tactics operate in the 'gray area' between peace and conflict, often exploiting ambiguity, plausible deniability and legal gaps. China has been particularly adept at using gray zone activities to advance its interests (Azad *et al.,* 2022, p. 87).

China operates in the gray zone, challenging the status quo without triggering a full-scale war. In 2009, China submitted a map to the UN with a hypothetical 'nine-dash line', claiming sovereignty over 80-90% of the South China Sea. This overlaps with the exclusive economic zones of neighbouring countries (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2021). China also uses economic leverage to pressure other countries without resorting to direct military force. Beyond physical actions, China engages in cyber operations and disinformation campaigns. These tactics shape narratives, influence public opinion and sow discord among rival claimants. While not kinetic warfare, they all contribute to the overall gray zone strategy.

China and India have long-standing territorial disputes along their shared border. These disputes have led to occasional military standoffs and incursions. China's actions in these areas often fall within the gray zone—neither outright conflict nor peaceful resolution (Brar, 2024). China has been building and enlarging 'xiaokang' villages along its contested border with India, which we will discuss later in the paper. Jun and Hart (2024) claim that these villages have dual-use infrastructure that serves both civilian and military functions, i.e., gray zone warfare tactics. Another gray-zone warfare technique employed by Beijing is tourism, which is strategically used as a political tool to assert sovereignty over disputed regions, as Timothy (2019) highlighted in the South China Sea (p. 25).

China claims Arunachal Pradesh as part of its territory (Zangnan or South Tibet), while India considers it integral to its territory. China is developing infrastructure near the disputed border to bolster its presence without provoking hostilities. This includes the construction of villages and dual-use infrastructure, blurring the line between civilian and military assets. China's gray zone strategy also involves information warfare. As Escriche (2022) claims, Beijing shapes narratives, influences public opinion and reinterprets international laws to support its claims.

If we talk about India's response, it has responded cautiously, aiming to ease tensions and avoid escalation. However, as China continues its gray-zone activities, Layton (2024) suggests that India must remain vigilant and consider calibrated responses to safeguard its interests. India has intensified efforts to improve border infrastructure. Initiatives like the Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP) and the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) aim to modernise villages along the LAC. These efforts enhance connectivity, surveillance capabilities and territorial control. However, Layton (2021) suggests that India's response may need to be symmetrical and incremental. Rather than sudden escalations, a measured, step-by-step approach to the future is considered appropriate, in contrast to conventional planning that works backwards from an identified end state.

4.2 Military and Dual-Use Infrastructure
China is constructing border defence villages called 'Xiaokang' (Well-off) along the LAC, which Kullashri (2022b) claims are to enhance surveillance. In 2017, the Tibetan Autonomous Region government initiated a project to construct 628 settlements across 21 counties spanning the Ngari, Shigatse, Shinna, and Nyingchi prefectures (Shekhawat, 2022). These villages were situated in the disputed territories. As of the end of 2020, Tibet had successfully constructed 604 border villages. Additionally, 206 industrial projects in border regions were commenced (Zehao, 2021). China has established Xiaokang villages across from the Tawang sector, Siang Valley and Lohit Valley in Arunachal Pradesh.

Considering China's focus on military-civilian integration, Choudhury (2024) also claims it is reasonable to anticipate that these Xiaokang border villages will function as a frontline outpost for deploying troops. The road network and civilian force near the border serve as defence and aid in rapid resource deployment during border confrontations. Consequently, these villages would serve as additional military bases near the LAC. In recent years, China, along with other territorial claimants in the region, has taken unilateral actions regarding the islands in the South China Sea (Timothy, 2019, p. 25), and similar actions may be observed in newly developed villages near LAC.

4.3 Implications for India
4.3.1 Volatility in Border Regions:
The border areas between India and China, such as the Galwan Valley and Doklam, show high levels of volatility. These regions experience ongoing flux, periodically destabilising the area. Military stand-offs and skirmishes occur unpredictably, keeping both nations on constant alert. For instance, the Galwan Valley clash in June 2020 resulted in casualties on both sides, significantly escalating tensions.

4.3.2 Strategic Significance of Disputed Areas:
These border regions are not only important from a territorial perspective but also serve as vital access lines and infrastructure corridors for both

countries. The strategic significance of these areas further increases volatility. Any disturbance, whether deliberate or unintentional, can affect military positions and supply routes.

4.3.3 Uncertainty in Strategic Calculations:

India and China have a protracted history of border conflicts, conflicting alliances and rival regional ambitions. Despite diplomatic discussions and high-level summits, strategic uncertainty persists. This uncertainty was evident in the 2017 Doklam standoff over disputed territory claimed by both Bhutan and China, an Indian ally. Such situations force India to recalibrate its strategic calculations constantly.

4.3.4 Mistrust and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):

Strategic initiatives like China's BRI exacerbate mistrust between India and China. India perceives the BRI, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing through disputed Kashmir, as a challenge to its sovereignty and regional influence. As Colman and Joshi (2024) claim, this further complicates India's strategic positioning and security considerations.

5. India's Strategic Response: Revitalising Border Villages

5.1 Border Area Development Programme (BADP)

The BADP is an undertaking by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (GOI). The aim is to address the specific developmental needs of those residing in distant, inaccessible regions near the international border, to achieve equitable development and foster a sense of safety. The BADP was launched in 1986-87 as a component of the Seventh Plan (1985-1990). Subsequently, the centre has provided complete financial support for the initiative, while the state governments have been responsible for its implementation. The initiative initially focused on Western border states like Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat, enhancing infrastructure for Border Security Force deployment (Manoharan et al., 2019, p. 5).

Table 1: Union Budget Data for BADP (2016-2017 to 2022-2023)
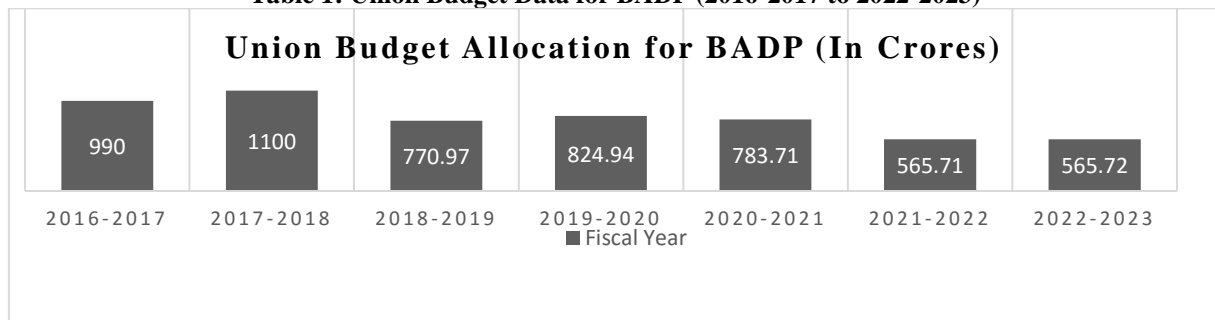
Note. Data sourced from *Union Budget Data for Border Area Development Programme (2016–17 to 2022–23)*, Budgets for Justice, JusticeHub. The dataset provides allocations and actual expenditures under the Border Area Development Programme (BADP), which aims to improve infrastructure and livelihoods in India's border regions. Retrieved from https://budgets.justicehub.in/datasets/union-budget-data-for-border-area-development-program

From Table 1, it is clear that the funding has declined by approximately 48.57% from the fiscal year 2017-2018 to 2022-2023. Over time, it expanded to Eastern sector states also. The program's focus shifted from infrastructure enhancement to broader security cooperation. Presently, the BADP comprises 457 blocks across 117 border districts in 16 states and 2 Union Territories. These include Ladakh, Nagaland, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir, Sikkim, Manipur, Gujarat, Uttarakhand, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Mizoram, Bihar, Meghalaya and Himachal Pradesh (MHA, n.d.-a). The focus of BADP is on six specific thematic areas: skill development, education, agricultural and water resources, basic infrastructure, financial inclusion and health infrastructure.

Table 2: Fund Released (Centre Share) Rs. in Crore under BADP

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Arunachal Pradesh	92.49	89.96	108.97	154.14	42.15	24.50	30.92
Himachal Pradesh	21	23.10	31	35	27.50	0	2.97
J&K / Ladakh UT*	115.20	130.11	190.39	198.89	114.37	0	16
Sikkim	20	20	25	28.01	53.01	14.97	32.43
Uttarakhand	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Note. Data sourced from the *Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP) Portal*. Retrieved from https://vvp.mha.gov.in/Home/Index

(* reorganization of Jammu & Kashmir state into UTs forming Ladakh UT on 31st October, 2019)

From 2014-15 to 2017-18, Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir/Ladakh and Sikkim experienced a consistent rise in centre spending. This increase in money indicates a deliberate emphasis on infrastructure and development in these regions. After 2019, several states had significant decreases, most likely due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note that Uttarakhand did not receive any allocations during this period, whilst funding for Himachal Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh decreased substantially after 2020.

BADP has been strategically important to India, but still, many further improvements and considerations are required. In their study of development efforts under BADP in Arunachal Pradesh, Mihu and Kaye (2024) found that many projects were implemented but not fully utilised by the local population. The roads developed under BADP were often impractical during the rain due to the use of substandard materials (p. 391). The majority of the local community in the study regions is unsatisfied with the quality of work carried out under BADP. Das (2024) claims the efficacy of the BADP in improving the living standards of individuals residing in border regions has been substandard. To overcome all these, as Manoharan *et al.,* (2019) suggested, coordination is crucial for preventing duplication of work and financial waste in BADP programmes, involving individuals, local institutions and government levels (p. 11). A unified approach is key, and appropriate local organisations, such as NGOs, self-help groups, and women's associations, should be identified to facilitate better integration.

5.2 Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP)
The VVP is a prominent initiative undertaken by the GOI to improve the standard of living in villages located along the northern border. The program's objective is to facilitate holistic development in border villages, with a specific emphasis on enhancing infrastructure, generating employment opportunities, and fostering tourism and cultural heritage. The operation focuses on villages located in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand and Ladakh UT. The centrally funded initiative, approved on the 15th of February 2023, was introduced in the Union Budget 2022-23 with a financial allocation of ₹4800 crores. This initiative covers the period from 2022 to 2025 and aims to promote the development of villages located along the northern border. During the initial stage, a total of 662 villages out of 2,963 will be included (MHA, n.d.-b; PIB Delhi, 2023).

Home Minister Amit Shah says the VVP aims to develop the first village, prevent migration and improve connectivity and infrastructure in rural areas. The VVP is an altruistic initiative designed to address the developmental disparities, specifically along India's

northern border, to curb the migration of citizens living in border areas. However, there are certain questions about the proper implementation of the VVP, just as with the BADP. The central government has not released funding to the states in a timely or complete manner. Additionally, state governments have made insufficient efforts to implement the BADP, further exacerbating the problem. Das (2024) further claims that the funds allocated to state governments through the BADP are frequently diverted to purposes unrelated to the border areas. Even though the government has claimed that there will be no overlap between VVP and BADP (MHA, n.d.-b), the effectiveness of its implementation will be seen in the coming years.

6. The Role of Local Communities in Border Security
6.1 First Line of Defence
In his statement, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh referred to the individuals residing in the border areas as 'strategic assets of the country' (Kullashri, 2022a). Villagers play a crucial role in providing vital information to defence troops about activities close to the border. Barahoti in Uttarakhand is an example of such a region where PLA patrols have been observed. The Bhotiya tribe and other communities migrate to these border areas with their livestock, providing crucial logistical support and local knowledge to assist the ITBP and other defence personnel. ITBP actively encourages them to do so, since their presence helps to establish and reinforce India's presence in crucial locations (Mohammad Anab & Jha, 2020).

6.2 Social and Economic Contributions and Challenges
International borders can create unique business and entrepreneurship opportunities in the border region. Both locational advantages and variations in other socioeconomic factors have an impact. Border areas offer a more diverse and inclusive consumer base due to their dynamic demographics and socioeconomics (Wang & Garduno-Rivera, 2021, pp. 4–5). These opportunities can lead to small businesses in professional services, transportation and tourism with cross-border impact. Some may become crucial for trade and cross-border communication.

However, the issue of farmland abandonment presents a significant challenge in the mountains. Even today, agriculture remains a prominent economic activity in many mountainous regions, and Yamaguchi *et al.,* (2016) argue that the relinquishment of agricultural land is a prominent and prevalent indicator of the collapse of local communities (p. 401). In a study of Sikkim by Pradhan and Lama (2022), it was found that government prohibitions on grazing and forest activities have led to socio-economic decline in rural areas, forcing people to abandon traditional agriculture (p. 179). Communities transitioned to tertiary income streams like

industrial employment (p.176). Uncultivated acreage expanded due to animal nuisance, labour shortages and disease impacts. Thus, it reduces already scarce economic activities in the border areas.

7. Policy Recommendations

- **Focus on Basics:** Rather than adopting out-of-the-box solutions, sticking to foundational strategies will be sufficient. The government needs to control the migration of natives from these areas while also restoring the centuries-old cross-border trade.
- **Restoring Villages:** While India may not have the financial capacity like China to build large border villages, restoring and revitalising existing ones can be a practical solution. Programs like converting 'ghost villages' to *'dost (Friend) villages'* through community-based tourism should be encouraged.
- **Reviving Traditional Practices:** One of the factor's driving migrations is the restriction on native access to forests and resources in the name of conservation. Many local tribes have historically relied on these lands for herbs and traditional practices. These activities should be reinstated under proper supervision to support livelihoods.
- **Promoting Sustainable Tourism:** The rise in tourism in regions like Ladakh, Uttarakhand and Arunachal Pradesh is promising and should be further encouraged. Tourism provides significant benefits to local communities and can serve as a sustainable economic model.
- **Cultural Preservation and Promotion:** The unique cultures and traditions of these regions need to be actively promoted. Establishing cultural centres, eco-friendly guest houses and curated stays would attract tourists, fostering livelihood opportunities for locals.
- **Balancing Security and Ecology:** It is crucial to strike a balance between national security and ecological conservation in these border areas. Overpopulation or overexploitation of resources in the Himalayan eco-sensitive zones could lead to severe environmental consequences. A properly planned sustainable program should be established before anything else.
- **Promoting Local Products:** Similar to Uttar Pradesh's 'One District, One Product' initiative; local handicrafts, herbs and other region-specific products should be promoted at the highest level, providing economic support to local communities.
- **Leveraging Media and Diplomacy:** Using all forms of media, entertainment and documentaries to highlight the history and uniqueness of these regions can attract attention. Collaborating with international organisations and friendly countries can secure funding and elevate these areas on a global platform through soft diplomacy.
- **Community Involvement:** Local communities should be involved in decision-making for border development projects, ensuring their concerns and needs are considered.
- **Environmental Initiatives and Digital Outreach:** Showcasing environmental efforts and sustainable development initiatives through digital platforms can build a positive global image for these regions.
- **Social media and Influencers:** Similar to the Maldives' tourism strategy, leveraging social media influencers and celebrities can help draw attention to these areas, promoting tourism and local culture.

8. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the current world order is very volatile. The two wars, the Russia-Ukraine War of 2022 and the Israel-Gaza conflict of 2023, have shaken the stable roots of the global order; invisible chaos prevails. The Chinese intention to annex Taiwan is no secret; it's just a matter of when. The West is pulling the economic cord on China, and retaliation might follow. Beijing might start a small war to suppress the rising voices inside the country, and in such a case, India needs to be prepared. The Pakistan factor is always there, too.

Prakash (2021) suggested that, to counter the China-Pakistan alliance in the long term effectively, India should prioritise self-reliance and actively explore various strategies (p. 75). As Manoharan *et al.,* (2019) said, *'a developed border is a safe border and a safe border is better than a safe army'* (p. 12). The securing and strengthening of border villages is one such strategy. We need to look at the basic needs of the locals there, and providing a livelihood is the key to maintaining and restoring the border population. Along with the new initiatives, their historical roots need to be protected and restored.

The situation along the LAC is complex, but restarting local trade between communities across the border would be beneficial. Historically, trade sustained people on both sides, and the halt in cross-border trade has highly affected livelihoods on the Indian side. Joshi (2018) also believed that the halt in trade with Tibet after the 1962 conflict may have led to the decline of these border communities, and villagers from Uttarakhand have confirmed the same (Mohammad Anab & Jha, 2020). The Galwan Valley incident has significantly altered India's stance on the LAC, and there are ongoing developments along the border from both sides. The proper implementation of VVP and BADP can be successful in India. The GOI should take its motto, 'to create a developed India, we must start by developing the first village in the country,' more seriously.

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