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Bhairav Battalions: The Indian Army's Force Re-Structuring

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“In this evolving operational environment, the necessity for specially trained, motivated and equipped troops capable of executing high-risk missions under adverse conditions is unequivocal”.

—General Anil Chauhan, Former Chief of Defence Staff

Abstract

The Indian Army's quest for the light commando Bhairav Battalions (BBs) is part of force restructuring with the induction of a lean special force that is agile and technologically superior. It comprises of integrated composition from all sister arms of the Infantry for multi-domain approach to fulfill the requirements of modern warfare. This restructuring is aimed at filling the operational gap between Parachute Special Forces (PARA SFs) and Infantry Battalions. They are also likely to relive PARA SFs of the tactical and operational roles.

Keywords: Light Commando Battalions, Force Restructuring, MDO

Introduction

The Indian Army (IA) is undergoing force restructuring as part of decade of transformation and raised 25 light commando Bhairav Battalions (BBs), out of which 15 are already operationalised (ANI, 2026). These BBs are lighter in size compared to normal infantry battalions and are mandated to conduct numerous specialised tasks like engaging high value enemy targets (Firstpost, 2025).

Force Restructuring

Force structuring is part of the preparation for war (IA Doctrine, 2004). The well-structured forces contributes to success in war, and to keep pace with evolving strategic scenarios, there is a continuous need to review the same (IA Doctrine, 2004).

As outlined in the IA doctrine (2004), the considerations in shaping the structures are majorly influenced by emerging or future threats; operational environments like

terrain and climate; kind of operational roles; quality and quantity of available equipment, etc. (IA Doctrine, 2004). One more aspect which is missing in that document but equally important is the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the available manpower in force. Similarly, the raising of the BBs is influenced by these factors.

Post Operation Sindoor, a need to have such a demanding and integrated force was felt to fulfill the requirements of modern warfare. The Former Chief of Army Staff, General Upendra Dwivedi announced their inception last year on 26 July 2025. Later in October 2025, the Former Director General Infantry, Lieutenant General Ajay Kumar, gave more details about the BBs and called them a “lean and mean” force made for launching surprise attacks, counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism (CI/CT) operations, conducting cross-border strikes on the adversary’s vulnerable points, etc. (Firstpost, 2025).

Survey Data

A survey was conducted by the author among the thirty retired and serving officers from the IA (from the seniority of a Major General to a Lieutenant) with a background in distinctive arms/services like Infantry (11x officers, excluding PARA SF), Artillery (6x), Armoured Corps (4x), PARA SF (2x), Corps of Engineers (2x), Intelligence Corps (2x), Army Service Corps (2x), Army Air Defence (1x), with a questionnaire designed on some specific aspects about these units (**See Appendix A**). The distinctive seniority and background has facilitated to get multi-dimensional / domain assessment from experts.

Thereafter, they were analysed and compared with the existing information to remove the institutional conflict of interest and bring some new insights into these light commando battalions.

Bhairav: The Terrific Light Commando Battalions

‘*Bhairav*’ is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘terrific’ or ‘fearsome’. These light commando battalions are named as ‘Bhairav Battalions’ (BBs). Their motto is ‘*Abhayam Bhairav*’ or ‘Fearless Protector’. Their insignia ‘carries a cobra snake in offensive mode

(fearless and prepared to strike), holding a dagger, and lightning strikes around' (represents speed and mobility to strike on short notice).

The IA has conceptualised the formation of a total of 25 such light commando battalions, out of which 15 are fully operationalised and deployed in their respective Areas of Responsibility (AORs). These BBs will be complementing the newly raised 'Rudra Brigades' (Katoch, 2025). However, it is not clear at this stage whether the troops will be permanently attached like the PARA SF or they will come on deputation for a period like that of the Rashtriya Rifles (RR).

The force structure of these units is discussed below:

An Agile Force

Each BB has the strength of about 250 commandos (about one-fourth of an infantry battalion), which makes it light and agile, and is equipped with advanced equipment (Dhital, A. 2025). It has about seven officers per battalion, and the rest are personnel below officer rank (PBOR) {Katoch, 2025}. These units are raised on the "save and raise" concept, without fresh troop accretions (Katoch, 2025). The IA has drawn/taken 11 troops per battalion from the existing 415 infantry battalions (Katoch, 2025). The light nature of these BBs makes them agile, easy in mobilisation, deployment, and conducting operations— 93.3 per cent of responders have agreed that their light nature will provide these advantages.

Integrated Manpower Composition for Multi-Domain Warfare

The BBs have an integrated composition of troops from all required arms and services, like Infantry, Artillery, Corps of Signals, Army Air Defence (AAD), etc. (Firstpost, 2025). Each commando is trained to fly a military drone for Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) missions and destroying the enemy targets with it as well (ANI, 2026). This integrated composition of troops makes it battle-ready for multi-domain operations, which is the need of the modern army. In survey, 83.3 per cent of officers have felt that the integrated composition of these BBs will allow them to

conduct multi-domain operations seamlessly, whereas 13.3 per cent were not sure. This diverse composition makes it the first of its kind unit in the IA.

Equipment

The standard weapon with the BBs is the AK-203 rifle (ANI, 2026). Its snipers are equipped with SAKO TRG 42 Sniper rifles (YouTube, 2025). They have close-quarter battle (CQB) carbines (X, 2026), Javelin anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) {X, 2026}, Ashni platoons with drones and loitering munitions squads (X, 2026), 40 mm multiple grenade launchers (MGLs) {X, 2025}, and Carl Gustaf rocket launchers (X, 2025). In vehicles, it has Force Motors' Light Strike Vehicles (LSVs) for all-weather striking capabilities with speed and mobility (X, 2025). It also has sophisticated communication and electronic warfare gadgets, like GPS jammers (X, 2025), under the command of Corps of Signals. Moreover, they are equipped with unmanned aerial vehicles like surveillance, kamikaze drones, etc. (X, 2025). Thus, equipment-wise, it has a variety of equipment for multi-domain operations.

Raised for Terrain-specific requirements

The BBs are being raised to fulfill the terrain-specific operational requirements. The troops in these units are the locals of the AOR, who are well-versed in the location, its weather, etc. (X, 2026). This will certainly reduce the stress of weather acclimatisation, gaining knowledge of the area, and help in building the intelligence networks (X, 2026). These aspects will certainly provide these BBs with an edge in operating and a better operational effectiveness. For example, the 2nd BB is raised under Jodhpur-based 12 Corps (Dhital, A. 2025), and deployed in Nasirabad, Rajasthan, having local troops from Rajasthan (Singh, S. 2026). Similarly, other BBs in the northern and the northeastern sectors follow the same approach. Moreover, the 90 per cent of officers in the survey have felt that this terrain-specific raising will facilitate better operational effectiveness, and 10 per cent were not sure, but no one denied or disagreed with this aspect.

Training Standards

The primary responsibility for training the troops goes to the respective regimental centres, where they receive two-three months of specialised training (Katoch, 2025). Thereafter, they undergo on-field training with the PARA SF units for another month (Pandit, R. 2025). These training aspects are pivotal in this case, as the troops are coming not only from infantry but also from various arms/services, for better cohesiveness and command. Moreover, the qualities of Special Forces are also inculcated in these units through specialised training. Moreover, under the battle of preparedness, these units were tested and validated in 'Exercise Akhant Prashar' last year (X, 2026). They are given technology-driven hybrid warfare training with 100 per cent of drone literacy among the commandos (X, 2026).

Significance of the BBs

As discussed, the structure of the BBs and the advantages of having such a force can be a game-changer. It is light enough to attain agility, technological superiority to suppress the adversary, and has multi-domain interoperability. There are no other such units in the IA, except for a similar concept in the RR, which is not a commando unit but has troops in a similar manner, from other arms like artillery and air defence (only in J&K for CI-CT roles). This makes the BBs very special in nature for any kind of demanding missions.

Fit for Hybrid Environment

The character of modern warfare is rapidly changing with the expansion in hybrid threats after the advancement of technology, merger of traditional and non-traditional domains (IA, 2004). The BBs are specially raised for meeting the needs of the modern hybrid warfighting (X, 2026), where the speed, mobility, maneuverability, technological superiority, integrated composition, etc., are all infused in these battalions. As today's war-time environment is transparent, where jointness has to be infused among the forces for maintaining surprise, and effective utilisation of the resources (Kumar, M. 2025). These battalions are digitally integrated and infused with real-time ISR, secured

communication, and network command centres, loitering munitions, and other sophisticated equipment (X, 2026). When asked about the effectiveness of the BBs against the traditional infantry battalions, 70 per cent of responders have felt that these units stand comparatively better for hybrid warfare, whereas 23.3 per cent remained neutral and 6.7 per cent did not respond.

Bridging the Operational Gap

There was an operational gap in the IA caused by the absence of any such force that could fill the gap between the traditional infantry and PARA SF battalions (Singh, S. 2026). The traditional infantry units are too slow and manpower-heavy in nature, whereas the PARA SF units are too small and strategic to be deployed for such roles (X, 2025).

The Joint Doctrine for Special Forces Operations (2025) highlights, “The overarching role of the Indian Special Forces is to act as a strategic asset. It is pertinent to note that Special Forces are not a substitute for conventional forces and are distinct from them” (IDS, 2025). It implies that SFs are generally for attaining strategic-level objectives, and, in the absence of any replacement, they were employed for tactical and operational roles.

It is important to see that the BBs will relieve the SF battalions from the non-strategic roles, such as CI-CT, border land holding, cross-border raids, etc., and reserve the SFs only for strategic-level missions (Katoch, 2025). 73.3 per cent of responders have felt that the BBs are capable of filling this operational gap, whereas 23.3 per cent were not sure.

When asked about the capabilities of BBs to relieve the SF units from non-strategic roles, 50 per cent of the officers felt that they can, 33.3 per cent were not sure, and 16.7 per cent disagreed. It reflects that it would be a challenging job for the BBs to replace the SFs without capability building of the similar nature as the latter one.

Controlling the Escalation Ladder

The BBs are created to dominate the ground and deter the adversary. They are likely to hold the ground with a philosophy of “deploy forward and stay” (in a similar

situation like the India-China LAC standoff in 2020) {Katoch, 2025}. They will be deployed on the “First In, Last Out” principle in contingencies (FP, 2025).

Most importantly, these units will provide the IA commanders with more options in the conventional domain for controlling the escalation ladder (X,2026). It will facilitate a proportionate response to the local provocations without undergoing the heavy or large-scale mobilisation. Earlier, the use of PARA SFs in such roles could raise the escalation ladder undesirably, as their roles are strategic (IDS, 2005). 60 per cent of officers in the survey have felt that the BBs will facilitate control over the escalation ladder in India's favour, whereas 20 per cent were not sure, and 20 per cent disagreed with the statement they would have any role to play. While, certainly the BBs will give options to the higher military leadership in controlling the escalation ladder if the force is used appropriately.

Similar options with Pakistan

While India's neighbour Pakistan has similar Light Commando Battalions (LCBs) in its Army for quite some time, they carry specialised equipment, are lean in strength, mobile in nature, and formed on a similar principle for easing the load over its Special Services Group (SSG) and fills the operational gap by adjusting itself as an intermediary force between the regular infantry and the SSG (Hilal Digital, 2025). Their roles include CI/CT operations, rapid deployment for any hostile environment, sabotage, intelligence gathering, etc., at tactical and operational levels (Hilal Digital, 2025). However, they are not as integrated/diverse as the BBs.

Challenges and Way Forward

No fresh troop accretions?

The “save and raise” methodology adopted by the IA for raising these BBs without fresh troop accretions has raised a question mark. A Brigadier-ranked infantry officer in the survey has highlighted the problems with this concept of “save and raise”. He says, “If these (BB) battalions are being raised without increasing the overall strength

(of the IA), it serves the purpose to a minor extent. We should have these battalions without degrading the strength of the contributing units”.

A similar observation also came from a Lieutenant General who questioned this concept and underscored that the IA is facing manpower shortages of over one lakh personnel, including in infantry (Katoch, P. 2025). As these troops are drawn from the infantry battalions, which already have manpower shortages, it may also affect the capabilities of the infantry battalions.

Therefore, there is a serious need to address the shortages and increase the overall numbers for maintaining sufficient numbers in infantry battalions, as the latter ones also have to fight wars. The fittest troops are drawn from these units to form the BBs; this may affect the operational capabilities of these infantry battalions.

Still Away From Taking Over the PARA SF

Some of the BBs are raised and operationalised, but the formation of the next 10 BBs is still awaited. It is important to note that they will take time to relieve the PARA SF seamlessly from non-strategic missions. The SFs will be training them for some time unless they are adequately trained and have sufficient operational expertise. Their capability development through proper training, operational guidance, and doctrinal absorption would facilitate the same.

Conclusion

The BBs are agile, equipped with state-of-the-art equipment, and have capabilities to operate in multi-domain warfare. Their absorption in the IA is meant to bridge the operational gap created by the infantry and the PARA SF. It will relieve the SF units of their tactical and operational roles and reserve them for the strategic missions. Moreover, their specialisation in tackling hybrid threats with high speed and mobility, their own ISR capabilities, ATGMs, loitering munitions, etc., will prove their worth in modern warfare. They are going to create more options for conventional warfighting and control the escalation ladder.

Regarding challenges, the “save and raise” concept is affecting the operational capabilities of the infantry battalions which is facing manpower shortages, and there is still time to see the progress of these BBs when they are adequately trained, provided with operational guidance, and doctrinally absorbed.

Appendix A*

Service	Indian Army								
Rank	Total	Arms / Services							
		Infantry (excluding PARA SF)	Artillery	Armoured Corps	PAR A SF	Corps of Engineers	Intelligence Corps	Army Service Corps	Army Air Defence
<i>Major General</i>	03	01	-	02	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Brigadier</i>	05	03	01	-	-	-	01	-	-
<i>Colonel</i>	09	04	02	02	01	-	-	-	-
<i>Lieutenant Colonel</i>	02	-	-	-	-	01	-	01	-
<i>Major</i>	04	01	-	-	01	01	01	-	-
<i>Captain</i>	03	01	01	-	-	-	-	01	-
<i>Lieutenant</i>	04	01	02	-	-	-	-	-	01
Total Officers	30	11	06	04	02	02	02	02	01

Source: Author's own Survey

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