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Bhairav Drone Force – India's Army Builds a 1-Lakh-Strong Drone Warfare Corps

7 January 2026

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SECURITY & DEFENCE

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WHY IN NEWS

The Indian Army officially unveiled the 'Bhairav' force — a dedicated drone warfare corps with over 1 lakh trained operatives across 15 battalions — during Army Day 2026. Combined with the simultaneous Emergency Procurement of the Suryastra precision rocket system (Rs 293 crore, 150-300 km range), this marks India's most significant doctrinal statement on autonomous and standoff warfare since the Kargil conflict.

WHY DRONES ARE NOW CENTRAL TO MODERN WARFARE

The wars of the 2020s have settled a debate that military theorists had argued for decades: **unmanned aerial systems (UAS) — drones — are not supplementary tools; they are decisive systems** that determine the outcome of tactical engagements.

Nagorno-Karabakh (2020): Azerbaijan's use of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones and Israeli loitering munitions against Armenian armor and air defenses demonstrated how relatively cheap UAS could neutralise expensive armored formations. The war lasted 44 days; drone strikes were the primary factor in Azerbaijan's victory.

Ukraine (2022–present): The war has seen UAS deployed at every level — from strategic (Ukrainian FPV kamikaze drones attacking oil refineries 1,200 km inside Russia) to tactical (individual squads using commercial drones to drop grenades on trenches). Both sides have developed mass drone production; Ukraine is now building over 1 million drones annually. Counter-drone (C-UAS) has become as important as drone warfare itself.

Gaza (2023–present): Israel's use of drone-launched precision munitions has transformed the strike calculus — smaller, cheaper platforms replacing manned aircraft for many strike missions.

The Indian takeaway: India's Army faces two adversaries with significant drone capabilities:

China's PLA has reorganised around drone integration — its TB001 "Twin-Tailed Scorpion" and WZ-7 high-altitude drones give it persistent ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) over Ladakh

Pakistan has procured Bayraktar TB2 drones and uses Chinese Wing Loong UAS; its drone infiltration attempts across the LoC have averaged 400+ per year (2022-2024)

WHAT THE BHAIRAV FORCE REPRESENTS

The **Bhairav** force is not a single unit but a doctrinal reorganisation of how the Army thinks about drone warfare.

Name significance: Bhairav is a fierce, wrathful aspect of Lord Shiva — chosen deliberately to signal an offensive posture, not merely a defensive/surveillance function.

Structure:

15 battalions currently raised across different theatre commands

25 more battalions planned (total eventual strength: 40 battalions)

Each battalion integrates: ISR drones (surveillance), FPV (First-Person View) attack drones, loitering munitions, counter-drone systems, and electronic warfare support elements

The 1 lakh operative number: India has trained over 1,00,000 soldiers in drone operation — from pilots who fly surveillance missions to technicians who maintain and repair UAS, to operators who conduct electronic countermeasures. This is among the largest national-level drone operator training programmes in the world for any military.

First public display: January 15, 2026, Jaipur Army Day Parade — the Bhairav contingent marched alongside conventional arms, signalling institutional acceptance at the highest level.

SURYASTRA — THE PRECISION STRIKE COMPLEMENT

The **Suryastra** procurement (announced January 7, 2026) is conceptually linked to the Bhairav force as the high-end precision strike complement:

Feature	Details
System type	Precision-guided rocket launcher
Contract	Rs 293 crore, Emergency Procurement
Indian company	NIBE Limited
Technology source	Elbit Systems, Israel (co-development)
Range	150–300 km
CEP	< 5 meters
Deployment	Army long-range precision strike (both Western and Northern fronts)

Emergency Procurement (EP): EP is a fast-track acquisition route in India's Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP 2020) that bypasses the multi-year standard procurement process when operational urgency demands it. EP contracts can be signed within weeks rather than years, typically for proven systems with demonstrated battlefield performance.

Why Israel? India and Israel have a mature defence partnership. Israel is India's 3rd largest arms supplier (after Russia and USA). Elbit Systems — Israel's largest private defence company — has multiple Indian co-production and technology transfer agreements.

THE COUNTER-DRONE CHALLENGE

The Bhairav force is not only offensive. Counter-drone (C-UAS) operations are equally critical given Pakistan's drone infiltration patterns along the LoC:

Pakistan's drone infiltration (2022–2024): The BSF and Indian Army have detected and intercepted hundreds of cross-border drone flights annually — primarily commercial quadcopters repurposed for drug smuggling and arms/explosive drops to terrorist modules in J&K and Punjab.

C-UAS technologies deployed by India:

D-4 (Drone Detect, Deter, Destroy) system: Developed by DRDO; radar detection + RF jamming + hard-kill option (laser or projectile)

Smash-2000 Plus: Israeli anti-drone sniper system; fire-control sight that auto-locks on drones

Integrated drone detection grids: Along the LoC using ground-penetrating radar, AI-enabled cameras, and acoustic sensors

The asymmetry problem: A commercial DJI Phantom drone costs Rs 50,000. A Spyder missile that could intercept it costs Rs 1–2 crore. The economics of drone warfare consistently favour the attacker. This is why the Army's counter-drone focus is on soft-kill (jamming, spoofing) rather than hard-kill for most infiltration scenarios.

INDIA'S DOMESTIC DRONE ECOSYSTEM

The Bhairav force's sustainability depends on India's ability to produce, repair, and innovate domestically:

Production Linked Incentive (PLI) for drones (2021): Rs 120 crore PLI scheme specifically for drones and drone components; target: Make India a global drone hub by 2030.

Key domestic manufacturers:

ideaForge (Mumbai) — India's largest drone manufacturer by revenue; **SWITCH** (military ISR drone); **Indra** (border surveillance); listed on NSE

Garuda Aerospace (Chennai) — agricultural and surveillance drones; received significant government contracts

Alpha Design Technologies — DRDO-connected; works on military-grade UAS

Tata Advanced Systems — partnering with Israel's Elbit for Indian UAS production

The Make in India opportunity: India currently imports ~80% of its military-grade drones. The Bhairav force's expansion to 40 battalions creates a guaranteed domestic demand signal that could catalyse an indigenous production ecosystem if procurement is channelled through PLI-certified Indian manufacturers.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: Bhairav force (1 lakh operatives; 15 battalions; Army Day Jaipur 2026; drone warfare corps); Suryastra (Rs 293 crore; NIBE Ltd; Elbit Systems Israel; 150-300 km range; CEP <5m; Emergency Procurement); DAP 2020 (Defence Acquisition Procedure; replaced DPP 2016); ideaForge (India's largest drone manufacturer; SWITCH/Indra drones; NSE-listed); PLI drones (Rs 120 crore; 2021); FPV drone; CEP (Circular Error Probable); C-UAS (Counter-UAS); Bhairav (fierce form of Lord Shiva).

Mains GS-3: India's drone warfare doctrine — what does the Bhairav force represent for Army modernisation? | Counter-drone challenge along LoC — economic asymmetry of drone warfare | Make in India in defence — can India build a sustainable military drone production ecosystem? | Emergency Procurement route — balancing operational urgency with indigenisation goals.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

BHAIRAV DRONE FORCE:

Operatives: 1,00,000+ trained drone operatives

Battalions: 15 raised; 25 more planned (40 total)

First public display: Army Day Parade, Jaipur, January 15, 2026

Named after: Bhairav — fierce aspect of Lord Shiva (offensive doctrine symbolism)

Part of: Indian Army “Year of Networking and Data Centricity” 2026

SURYASTRA:

Contract: Rs 293 crore, Emergency Procurement (January 2026)

Contractor: NIBE Limited (India)

Technology source: Elbit Systems, Israel

Range: 150–300 km

CEP: < 5 meters

Purpose: Long-range precision strike; Western and Northern theatre

INDIA-ISRAEL DEFENCE PARTNERSHIP:

Israel is India’s 3rd largest defence supplier (after Russia, USA)

Elbit Systems: Israel’s largest private defence company

Key Elbit systems in Indian service: artillery computers, EW systems, helmet-mounted sights

Other Israeli systems: Rafael Barak (naval SAM), Spike ATGM, Heron/Searcher drones

DEFENCE ACQUISITION PROCEDURE (DAP 2020):

Replaced: DPP (Defence Procurement Procedure) 2016

Priority order: IC (Indian with 50%+ indigenous content) > I > II-A/B/C > III > IV

Emergency Procurement: fast-track; bypasses standard timeline; for operational urgency

Make in India: minimum 50% indigenous content in IC category

INDIA’S DRONE ECOSYSTEM:

PLI Scheme (Drones): Rs 120 crore; 2021; target global hub by 2030

ideaForge: India’s largest drone maker; SWITCH (military ISR), Indra (border surveillance); NSE-listed

D-4 System: DRDO C-UAS; Detect-Deter-Destroy; radar + RF jamming + hard kill

Pakistan drone infiltrations: 400+ per year (LoC/IB Punjab & J&K)

GLOBAL DRONE WARFARE MILESTONES:

Nagorno-Karabakh 2020: Bayraktar TB2 decisive in Azerbaijan victory

Ukraine 2022+: 1 million+ drones annually; FPV kamikaze drone revolution

India’s drone policy: Civil Aviation Requirements (CAR) for drones; DGCA drone regulations; DigitalSky platform (UAS Traffic Management)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Bayraktar TB2: Turkish drone; 27 km ceiling; 200 km range; 150 kg payload; used by 35+ countries

Loitering munition vs drone: Loitering munitions are one-way kamikaze weapons (HAROP, Harpay); drones are reusable platforms

India's iDEX (Innovations for Defence Excellence): supports drone startups; 350+ innovations funded

Sources: AffairsCloud, PIB, Ministry of Defence, Indian Army

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