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Republic Day 2026 Parade — Phased Battle Array, Swarm Drones, Robotic Dogs, and the Awards

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SUBJECTS COVERED**SECURITY & DEFENCE****SCIENCE & TECH****POLITY****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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WHY IN NEWS

The 77th Republic Day parade (January 26, 2026) was the most technologically distinctive in India’s history — debuting a “Phased Battle Array” combat formation, robotic surveillance dogs, and coordinated swarm drone warfare for the first time. Simultaneously, Maharashtra’s Ganeshotsav tableau, the Indian Navy’s marching contingent, and Delhi Police were declared winners in their respective categories.

THE REPUBLIC DAY PARADE — A STRUCTURAL OVERVIEW

The Republic Day parade on **Kartavya Path** is India’s most prestigious military-ceremonial event. It serves three distinct functions:

Accountability: Civilian review of military capability before the civilian-elected President

Signalling: Display of indigenous defence technology to adversaries and allies

Unity: State/UT tableaux as a window into India’s cultural federalism

The 2026 parade was exceptional because it transformed all three functions simultaneously.

PHASED BATTLE ARRAY — A DOCTRINAL SHIFT IN DISPLAY

For the first time in the history of India’s Republic Day parade, the military assets were arranged in “**Phased Battle Array**” format — a tactical combat formation rather than the traditional display-march order.

The traditional format (pre-2026): Military units marched by category — infantry, artillery, armour, navy, air force — in a linear, categorical sequence primarily designed for visual spectacle.

The new Phased Battle Array format (2026): Units were arranged to simulate an actual **tactical attack sequence**:

Phase	Assets	Role
Phase 1 (Leading)	Reconnaissance drones	Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (ISR)
Phase 2	Shaktimaan Artillery Regiments	Drone + loitering munition warfare (new combination)
Phase 3	Divyastra Batteries	Conventional artillery + precision-guided drones
Phase 4	Bhairav Light Commando Battalions	Fast-attack infantry (debut of newly raised Bhairav Battalion)

What this signifies: The Phased Battle Array format communicates that Indian military doctrine has evolved from platform-centric (tanks, guns, aircraft in silos) to **effects-based and integrated warfare** — where drones, loitering munitions, electronic warfare, and conventional firepower work as a single networked system. This is the doctrine of modern warfare as seen in Ukraine and Gaza (2022–2025).

ROBOTIC DOGS — FIRST APPEARANCE

What they are: Military-grade autonomous ground robots shaped like dogs, equipped with:

- Multi-spectral sensors (thermal, night-vision, visual cameras)
- AI-powered navigation (autonomous obstacle avoidance)
- Communication relay capabilities
- Optional payload mounting (sensor packages, light weapons, supplies)

Role in modern military: Robotic dogs are being deployed for:

- Perimeter surveillance** — patrol of forward operating bases, borders, strategic installations
- CASEVAC** (Casualty Evacuation) in forward areas — carry supplies to injured soldiers
- EOD** (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) — carry equipment to IED locations
- Cave and tunnel operations** — where human entry is high-risk

India’s development: DRDO and private sector companies (Tata Advanced Systems, L&T Defence, several startups under iDEX) have developed robotic dog prototypes. The Republic Day display marked their first official military showcase.

Global context: The US Army has tested Ghost Robotics’ Q-UGV (Quadruped Unmanned Ground Vehicle) and Boston Dynamics’ Spot. China’s PLA showcased robotic dog formations as early as 2021. India’s debut in 2026 signals a convergence with global military robotics.

SWARM DRONES — INDIA'S FIRST PUBLIC DISPLAY

The 2026 Republic Day also featured India's first-ever public demonstration of **coordinated swarm drone warfare**.

What is a drone swarm? A swarm is a group of autonomous or semi-autonomous drones that:

- Communicate with each other and with a command centre

- Self-assign tasks (target identification, route planning, formation maintenance) using AI

- Overwhelm enemy defences through mass and coordination — traditional point-defence systems (surface-to-air missiles, CIWS guns) cannot engage more targets than their fire rate allows

- Are extremely cost-effective (one swarm of 100 small drones can saturate a sophisticated air defence system costing \$100 million+)

India's swarm drone programme:

- iDEX (Innovations for Defence Excellence)** has funded multiple swarm drone startups

- DRDO's **Centre for Airborne Systems (CABS)** is developing autonomous swarm coordination algorithms

- Project SWARM** — DRDO initiative for naval and air force swarm capabilities

- India's first swarm test (not Republic Day): A 75-drone swarm display during India's 75th Independence Day (August 15, 2022) — marking technology readiness

Strategic application: India-Pakistan and India-China border contexts; sea-denial in the Indian Ocean; HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief).

REPUBLIC DAY AWARDS 2026

Tableaux Winners

State/UT Tableaux:

Position	State/UT	Theme	Significance
1st	Maharashtra	“Ganeshotsav: A Symbol of Aatmanirbharta”	Ganesh Chaturthi as metaphor for self-reliance (Bal Gangadhar Tilak first celebrated it publicly in 1893)
2nd	Jammu & Kashmir	Rich handicrafts and folk dances	Post-Article 370 abrogation (August 2019) representation of J&K as UT
3rd	Kerala	Water Metro + 100% digital literacy	Kochi Water Metro (world’s largest inland water metro); Kerala’s near-100% digital literacy achievement

Central Ministries Tableaux:

Position	Ministry	Theme
Best	Ministry of Culture	“Vande Mataram — The Soul Cry of a Nation”
Popular Choice	Dept. of School Education & Literacy	National Education Policy 2020

Marching Contingent Winners

Category	Winner
Best Armed Forces	Indian Navy
Best CAPFs	Delhi Police

UNDERSTANDING THE TABLEAU PROCESS — UPSC NOTE

Republic Day tableaux are not merely cultural displays — they are a form of **competitive federalism** and **government communication**:

Selection process:

States/UTs and Central Ministries submit proposals in October–November (for January’s parade)

An expert committee evaluates on: thematic relevance, design, movement, commentary, music

Rejected proposals are a diplomatic issue (states protest exclusions routinely)

Historical controversies: Tamil Nadu has repeatedly alleged that its tableaux are rejected for political reasons (notably in 2022–23); West Bengal has similarly complained. The selection process is governed by the Ministry of Defence; cultural/political tensions occasionally surface.

What the winners reflect in 2026:

Maharashtra's **Ganeshotsav** win: Connects Bal Gangadhar Tilak's 1893 Swadeshi movement tradition with 2026's Aatmanirbhar Bharat

J&K's 2nd place: Normalisation narrative — J&K participating as a UT (not a state) for the 7th year since Art 370 abrogation

Kerala's **Water Metro**: Showcasing infrastructure achievement; Kerala Water Metro is the world's largest inland water transport network of its kind (78 km network, 15 routes, Kochi)

THE TABLEAU THAT WASN'T — BACKGROUND

Several states were reported to have submitted proposals that were not selected, including proposals themed around state-specific welfare schemes, linguistic heritage, and industrial achievements. The competitive tableau process annually generates media coverage of inclusion/exclusion narratives — reflecting the ongoing tension between states' desire for visibility and the Centre's curation of a unified national narrative.

GALLANTRY AWARDS SUMMARY

See separate coverage of Ashoka Chakra (Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla), Kirti Chakra (Prashanth Balakrishnan Nair), and Shaurya Chakra (first women naval officers: Lt Cdr Dilna K. and Lt Cdr Roopa A.) in the January 28, 2026 edition.

Total 2026: 70 Armed Forces gallantry awards (6 posthumous); 982 police/fire/home guard/correctional services personnel honoured.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Republic Day 2026 tableau winners — Maharashtra (Ganeshotsav, 1st), J&K (2nd), Kerala (Water Metro, 3rd); Ministry of Culture (Vande Mataram, best ministry); Indian Navy (best march, Armed Forces); Delhi Police (best march, CAPFs); Phased Battle Array (first time 2026); Bhairav Battalion (debut); robotic dogs (first Republic Day appearance); swarm drones (India's first public display); iDEX full form; DRDO CABS.

*Cultural tableau process — competitive federalism; Ganeshotsav history (Tilak 1893); Vande Mataram in national symbolism. **GS-2:** Article 370 abrogation (August 2019) and J&K's status; Kerala's digital literacy achievements; NEP 2020 highlights; Republic Day as democratic accountability mechanism. **GS-3:** Phased Battle Array and integrated warfare doctrine; swarm drones (technology, iDEX, DRDO); robotic dogs (military robotics); drone warfare implications for India-China/India-Pakistan border security; maritime drones and Indian Ocean security.*

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

REPUBLIC DAY 2026 WINNERS:

Tableau 1st: **Maharashtra** (Ganeshotsav) | 2nd: J&K | 3rd: **Kerala** (Water Metro)

Ministry Tableau: **Ministry of Culture** (Vande Mataram)

March (Armed Forces): **Indian Navy** | March (CAPFs): **Delhi Police**

PHASED BATTLE ARRAY:

First time at Republic Day: **2026**

Format: Recon drones → Shaktibaan Regiments → Divyastra Batteries → Bhairav Battalions

Concept: **Effects-based integrated warfare** (vs. platform-centric display)

ROBOTIC DOGS:

First Republic Day appearance: **2026**

Uses: Perimeter surveillance, CASEVAC, EOD, tunnel operations

Global pioneers: US Army (Ghost Robotics, Boston Dynamics Spot), China's PLA

SWARM DRONES:

India's first public demonstration: Republic Day **2026**

Earlier test: 75-drone display, Independence Day **August 15, 2022**

India's programme: iDEX startups + DRDO CABS + Project SWARM

Principle: Many cheap drones overwhelm expensive point-defence systems

GANESHOTSAV HISTORY:

Festival: Ganesh Chaturthi — 10-day festival in honour of Lord Ganesha

Public celebration started: **1893** by **Bal Gangadhar Tilak** (Pune) — to mobilise community against British rule; became a vehicle for Swadeshi sentiment

Maharashtra's Maharashtra tableau 2026: Connects Aatmanirbhar Bharat to Tilak's 1893 Swadeshi tradition

KERALA WATER METRO:

System: Kochi Water Metro — **15 routes, 78 km** network

Type: World's largest inland water transport network of its kind

Built under: Kochi Metro Rail Limited (KMRL) + German Development Bank (KfW) financing

IDEX:

Full form: **Innovations for Defence Excellence**

Under: **DIO** (Defence Innovation Organisation), Ministry of Defence

Purpose: Fund startups and MSMEs for defence tech innovation

Launched: **2018**

J&K STATUS:

Article 370 abrogated: **August 5, 2019** (Government of India; President's Order)

J&K reorganised into two UTs: **Jammu & Kashmir** (legislature) + **Ladakh** (no legislature)

SC upheld abrogation: **December 11, 2023** (Constitution Bench, 5-0 verdict)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

CABS: Centre for Airborne Systems (DRDO lab) — develops unmanned aircraft, airborne electronics

Loitering munition: Also called “kamikaze drone” — flies until it finds target, then detonates; used in Ukraine war by both sides (Lancet, Shahed-136); India developing indigenous versions

CIWS: Close-In Weapon System — shipboard rapid-fire gun against incoming missiles/drones

Gallantry award total 2026: 70 Armed Forces (6 posthumous) + 982 police/fire/civil defence

Sources: PIB, DD News, Drishti IAS, The Print, The Hindu

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