

Planning and Impact of Special Operations during the 1971 Indo-Pak War

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India had all of two weeks to achieve the politico-military end state of liberating Bangladesh, before the international community intervened to impose a ceasefire. Speed and tempo of operations were imperative. Indian Armed Forces exploited the special operations capabilities to ensure an early fall of Dhaka. The airborne assault at Tangail, the audacious helilift of troops across the mighty Meghna by General Sagat Singh with effective support from the Mukti Bahini contributed to the early fall of Dhaka with most defences still intact. Along the Western front, the 80 km deep raid on Chachro by 10 PARA Commando created a dilemma for the Pakistan Army, tying down frontline troops for defence of installations. The raid on the Gun Position at Mandhol (Poonch) by 9 PARA Commando, demoralised the Pakistani troops and effectively delayed any offensive by the Pakistan army in the Poonch sector.

Keywords: 1971 War, Tangail Airborne Operations, Meghna helilift, Chachro Raid, Mandhol

The fortnight-long 1971 war between India and Pakistan in 1971 is a classic study in detailed planning, preparation, and a speedy, swift execution of military operations to achieve the desired political end-state. The war ended in less than two weeks with a decisive victory for India and resulted in the creation of Bangladesh, which was then known as East Pakistan.¹ Pakistan and the Pakistan Army were decimated into submission in the East, leading to the largest surrender of forces after

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the World War II. The Indian Armed Forces achieved the ‘military objectives’ and the ‘desired political end-state’ against all odds, capturing East Pakistan and liberating Bangladesh before the international community and the United Nations imposed a forced ceasefire. Speed was imperative. The Bangladesh resistance movement, Mukti Bahini, contributed in a major way in the unprecedented victory by disrupting and demoralising the Pakistan Army.

Political directions given by the Indira Gandhi-led government to the Indian Armed Forces were categorical:

- Liberate as much territory as possible in the east to set up a provincial Bangladesh government.
- Swift campaign of short duration in order to achieve objectives as there was a high likelihood of UN intervention.
- Defend Bhutan at all costs in case of Chinese intrusion.
- Ensure that conditions in liberated Bangladesh are conducive for the return of 10 million refugees residing in India.

Derived from the clear political objectives, the military aims were:

- Fight a holding, offensive–defensive battle in the west. In the east, ensure maximum speed of operations to force Pakistan to hand over the country to the provincial Bengal Government (established on 10 April 1971).
- Capture Khulna and Chittagong at the earliest and threaten Dhaka.
- To capture Dhaka.
- Launch operations in winter to negate any effective military intervention by China to support Pakistan.

TERRAIN—EAST PAKISTAN

To fully comprehend the enormity of the military objectives, especially in view of the restrictions of time imposed, speed of operations would dictate the success in the East Pakistan. Given the riverine terrain and the fortress-like defences constructed by the Pakistan Army, the task seemed near-impossible. Hence, planning and successful execution of special operations were critical to achieving the desired politico-military end-state. Prior to detailing the special operations, it is imperative to briefly analyse the terrain in East Pakistan and the relative force levels, to put it in context.

The terrain in erstwhile East Pakistan is mostly riverine interspersed with large tracts of marshy jungle astride the 700-plus kms of coastline along the Bay of Bengal. Lying at the confluence of the Ganga (Padma), Brahmaputra (Jamuna), and Meghna rivers, the terrain is prone to floods in the monsoons and drought in summers. The physiography is characterised by two distinctive features: a broad deltaic plain subject to frequent flooding, and a small hilly region crossed by swiftly flowing rivers.² Bangladesh has a total landmass of 1,44,000 sq km extending 820 km by 600 km. East Pakistan was located nearly 2,000 km from West Pakistan and shared a 4,096-km-long land border with India. On the south is a highly irregular deltaic coastline of 600 km, fissured with rivers and streams flowing into the Bay of Bengal.³

In the context of military operations, the major impediment to the maintenance of momentum and speed were the mighty rivers; the many crossings had to be captured and secured for the progress of operations (Map 1). The waterways comprise three mighty river systems:

- The massive Jamuna (Brahmaputra) river flows from the north till the confluence with river Padma, subsuming the waters of river Teesta.
- The mighty Padma (Ganga) flows from West Bengal in India till the confluence with river Jamuna 75 km west of Dhaka, a formidable obstacle for any offensive. The Padma is a 2,150-km-long river system, generally aligned from west to east, joining river Meghna at Chandpur nearly 100 km south of Dhaka.
- Meghna–Surma river at 670 km long is a major waterway formed by six rivers. These river systems all flow into the Bay of Bengal. Operations in the riverine terrain are the most challenging and time-consuming. Dhaka was and is a formidable objective, with three mighty river systems providing it with the requisite all-round defence.

Historically, airborne and special heliborne operations (special operations) have been successfully executed to maintain the momentum of attack and speed up operations. As speed and time were of essence in the Bangladesh war, the Indian Armed Forces planned and executed special operations with unprecedented success, surprising not only the Pakistan Army but also the world. It is a common narrative that India had limited time to achieve the objectives before the world powers (USA/UN) enforced a ceasefire. Special operations conducted by the Indian



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Map I Terrain—Eastern Sector

Armed Forces during the 13-day war from 3 December 1971, leading to the surrender by the Pakistan Army and the liberation of Bangladesh, make an interesting study. The many actions by Mukti Bahini that disrupted, degraded, and demoralised the Pakistan Army, as also the covert and clandestine operations executed prior to the declaration of war, are a study in themselves, and hence have not been analysed in this article.

SPECIAL OPERATIONS

Special operations are defined as: 'Unconventional military operations, undertaken in a hostile or politically sensitive environment, to achieve political and military objectives at the national, strategic and operational level and to safeguard economic interests. Their arena extends the complete spectrum of conflict and ranges from direct action to covert and clandestine operations. These are undertaken mostly in concert with other elements of national power.⁴' Special operations were an integral and essential component of the planning process to ensure an early culmination of war by maintaining the tempo of operations in the Eastern Sector. On the Western Sector, special operations were planned and executed to disrupt and demoralise the enemy by typical commando raids. Prior to studying the special operations executed by the Indian Armed Forces, it will be prudent to briefly analyse the role and contribution of the Mukti Bahini, who were equally instrumental in the destruction of the Pakistan Army and the quick culmination of the war. The real-time intelligence, knowledge of the terrain, and the support of the people contributed to the war effort in a big way as also the success of the special operations. Pakistan Army somehow did not deploy forces to defend the road axis and avenues leading to Dhaka; however, most of the bridges, ferries, and crossings on the rivers were defended strongly to cause both attrition and delay and give time to the international community to step in and seek a ceasefire. However, two back-to-back operations by the Indian Army foiled the plan: one was the Meghna heli-bridge airlift on 9 December, and another, the Tangail airdrop on 11 December.⁵ The special operations planned and executed during the war were:

- The airborne operations at Tangail to capture the Poongli bridge in the Eastern Sector, leading to the early capture of Dhaka.
- The special heliborne operations in support of 4 Corps offensive—Meghna crossing.
- The Chachro raid in the west.
- The raid on Mandhol—Western Sector (Poonch).

AIRBORNE OPERATIONS—TANGAIL

This is the account of the first airborne operation launched by India against Pakistan post-Independence. The Bangladesh war of 1971, often called a 'lightning campaign', is well-recorded in the annals of military

history. The para drop on 11 December at Tangail behind the enemy lines was India's trump card, which unhinged Pakistani forces in East Pakistan and ultimately led to the fall of Dacca (now Dhaka).⁶

Tangail is a major city in the Dhaka division. The main objective given to the airborne force was to secure the Poongli bridge on the mighty Jamuna. A secure crossing on the Jamuna river was essential to facilitate the uncontested advance of the ground forces astride the lightly held Manikganj–Dhaka axis, thus bypassing the strongly held Tongi–Dhaka axis. The success of all special operations is contingent on detailed planning, intelligence, preparation, training and leadership. The planning for the airborne assault had been initiated at the Army and Air Headquarters in New Delhi in early October.

With Major General Inder Gill, a die-hard paratrooper himself, as the Director of Military Operations in New Delhi, the Pakistan Army should have appreciated and factored the integration of special operations into the war plans of the Indian Armed Forces. General Inder Gill, a legendary paratrooper, was among a small team who executed Operation Harling to destroy the Gorgopotamos rail bridge in Greece behind enemy lines in the autumn of 1942 and was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry.⁷ As a young Second Lieutenant of the Royal Sappers, his first parachute descent was a combat descent. Hence, the airborne assault at Tangail was integral to the early capture of Dhaka in the planning stages itself. Airborne operations need detailed planning and coordination at all levels, from the service headquarters to intermediary headquarters, and equally importantly, between the air task and airborne commanders.

Lieutenant General Mathew Thomas, the then commander of 50 (Independent) Parachute Brigade, writes in his blog:

In the third week of Oct 1971, I was called up to Army HQ to discuss the proposed airborne operations with Army and Air HQ. I had a preliminary discussion with the Director of Military Operations (DMO) Maj Gen Inder Singh Gill PVSM, MC who was also the Colonel of the Parachute Regiment. He was fully aware of the pros and cons involved in executing the intended airborne tasks, nevertheless heard me out, my assessment and proposals patiently. He cleared a lot of my doubts with suggestions as to what was practically feasible. Finally, we had a plan for the use of paratroops should a war situation be thrust on us.⁸

Lt Gen Mathew Thomas goes on to detail the options during the planning stages of the airborne operation. He writes that Lieutenant

General J.S. Aurora, another accomplished paratrooper, wanted the airborne operation to be carried out along the Jamalpur–Tangail–Dacca axis as the major part of his forces was advancing along this axis, which incidentally was also the shortest route to Dhaka. Accordingly, likely Drop Zones (DZs) were selected in the vicinity of crossings on Jamuna river near Tangail, as also along with a ferry on Lohajang river. On the capture of the crossings along Jamuna, the advancing columns under Major General GS Nagra would not only get an uncontested run to the outskirts of Dhaka but also interdict enemy columns withdrawing from Jamalpur and Mymensingh from reinforcing the Dhaka defences. A well-respected Mukti Jodha, Tiger Siddiqui, with large numbers of the Mukti Bahini, had effective control in and around Tangail, and hence, he could be contacted to assist the airborne force, enhancing the probability of success. The advancing columns of 101 Area would then link up with the airborne force, duly supported by Tiger Siddiqui's Mukti Bahini, thus setting the stage for the 'Battle for Dhaka'. The timing of the airborne operation, however, was contingent on the Indian Air Force achieving a 'favourable air situation', or at best, 'air superiority', in the intended area of operations. The progress of the ground operations would have to be fine-tuned to fit in with the airborne assault(s) as it was imperative that the link-up between the airborne assault forces be at the earliest.⁹ The Service Headquarters issued a joint directive for the airborne assault on 29 October 1971, setting in motion the preparation and detailed planning of India's first-ever airborne operation. In early November 1971, a Joint Planning Cell was established at Advance Headquarters Eastern Air Command, conjointly staffed by Air Force and Parachute Brigade officers, for detailed planning and coordination. In mid-November, Captain P.K. Ghosh of the Parachute Brigade Signal Company, a bold and adventurous officer, fluent in Bangla, was infiltrated into the Tangail area and tasked to establish contact with Tiger Siddiqui to persuade him to provide detailed intelligence and to support the airborne drop. On 16 November 1971, the final Joint Army/Air Plan for airborne operations was issued, signed by Major General J.F.R. Jacob, Chief of Staff HQ, Eastern Command, and Air Vice-Marshal C.G. Devashar, Senior Air Staff Officer, Eastern Air Command.¹⁰ This set the stage for the execution of the largest airborne assault ever by India, thus ensuring the early fall of Dhaka.

It is well documented that the US Task Force 74, led by the 75,000-ton USS Enterprise, then the world's largest nuclear-powered aircraft carrier,

with 70 bombers and fighter aircraft, sailed into the Bay of Bengal on 11 December 1971, officially to evacuate the American citizens. But it was well known that the manoeuvre was aimed to deter India and prevent the liberation of Bangladesh.¹¹ The move of USS Enterprise coincided with the airborne operations. The US would have realised that the success of the airborne operation would lead to the inevitable fall of Dhaka and an end to the liberation war.

The 2 Para (Maratha) were selected for the airborne assault along with support elements of 17 Parachute Field Artillery Regiment, sappers, signallers, and medical staff of the units of the Parachute Brigade. The airborne operation was mounted on 11 December 1971 at 1423 hrs from Dum Dum (Calcutta) and Kalaikunda airfields with 46 aircraft. The Pathfinders took off from Dum Dum 30 minutes earlier to secure and mark the 'drop zone' and receive the main drop, duly aided by Tiger Siddiqui and his Mukti Bahini. The Pathfinder group secured and marked the drop zone by 1555 hrs on 11 December. As is the normal practice, the heavy and supply drop preceded the main drop. The entire battalion group, including the supply and heavy drop, was completed by 1650 hrs.¹² Forty-six aircraft, including the C-119 (Fairchild Packet), AN12, C-47 Dakota, and Caribou aircraft were employed for the airborne assault. The assault echelons, taking advantage of the surprise and shock effect, moved with speed to capture the objectives, Poongli bridge and ferry across the mighty Jamuna river, which the enemy was defending with a platoon each, supported by a few Razakars. Despite the Indian Air Force having achieved complete air superiority in the early days of the war over East Pakistan, Pakistan Army failed to appreciate the employment of airborne forces. The 2 Para (Maratha) battalion group captured the assigned objectives of Poongli bridge and the ferry by 2000 hrs the same day, that is, within four hours of the heavy and supply drop on 11 December, thus furthering the swift advance by 101 Communication Zone under Major General Nagra. The capture of the Poongli bridge by the paratroopers also cut off Pakistan's 93rd Brigade, which was retreating from Mymensingh to defend Dhaka, which again contributed to the early fall of Dhaka. Advancing from the south, First Maratha Light Infantry, a sister battalion, broke through the Tangail defence to link up with the 2 Para (Maratha), thus securing both ends of the bridge. Around 1,000 paratroopers were airdropped at Tangail along with a battery of 75mm pack Howitzers, 106mm recoilless guns, jeeps, and other essential combat loads—the Tangail drop is one of the largest

ever post-World War II.¹³ Right up to the end of hostilities, Lieutenant General Niazi and his associates believed that India was employing a brigade strength of its paratroopers, and this further unnerved him. There was no Pakistani troop interference at the time of the drop; however, the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages panicked and began to run away from the area. Major General Sukhwant Singh writes that when the villagers heard the cry of 'Jai Bangla', they felt reassured and later flocked to the drop zone, all eager to carry loads and act as guides.¹⁴ The Pakistan Army was on the run and its eventual defeat was now simply a matter of time.¹⁵ However, the capture of the bridgehead was not without a fight by the enemy, which recognised the strategic implications of the special operations. A battalion of the Pakistan Army launched an immediate counter-attack to recapture the bridge but was defeated. Thereafter, Pakistan Army units launched two more counter-attacks on the night of 11/12 December from the northern and eastern directions with a battalion strength each, supported by Razakars. Both counter-attacks were beaten back by the paratroopers, with the enemy suffering heavy casualties. In all, the enemy suffered 143 killed and 10 wounded, 2 officers, 17 Other Ranks, and 10 Razakars were captured, together with considerable arms and ammunition and some vehicles.¹⁶ The next morning, a desperate Pakistan Army, realising the criticality of recapturing the Poongli bridge on Jamuna, launched two more daylight attacks with nearly 500 men reinforced by Razakars.¹⁷ These counter-attacks too were beaten back and the Poongli bridge and ferry were firmly in control of the Indian Army, thus facilitating the race to Dhaka by the 101 Communication Zone.

Deception and surprise were inbuilt in the plans and succeeded in deceiving the Pakistan Army into believing that the advance of 101 Communication Zone was diversionary. This was an intentional move by General J.S. Aurora to mislead the enemy into thinking that the Indian Army's advance into Dhaka would take place through the Comilla border.¹⁸ To further reinforce the deception plan, General Jacob addressed a press conference in Calcutta on the night of 11 December after the drop saying that the Indian paratroopers had surrounded Dhaka city and that Dhaka was waiting to fall any day as it was surrounded by a division. However, in reality, the division was a battalion of paratroopers who had dropped not in Dhaka but over 100 km north in Tangail. Pakistani command was distressed by this bluff; it created a tremendous amount of psychological pressure on General Niazi to surrender.¹⁹ The airborne

assault at Tangail surprised the Pakistani leadership, thus speeding up the fall of Dhaka and an early end to the war. The support and the many actions by Tiger Siddiqui and his Mukti Bahini were critical to the success of the operation and fall of Dhaka. One of the most significant components of this plan was the landing of a battalion of paratroopers in Tangail.²⁰

Writing for *ThePrint*, Lieutenant General Nirbhay Sharma, who was the Adjutant of 2 Para (Maratha) says:

I was a young Captain and Adjutant of the battalion. Colonel K.S. Pannu, my Commanding Officer, asked me to carry a message. I, along with ADC to the GOC, Captain Hitesh Mehta, carried a handwritten message from General Nagra for General Niazi. It read: 'My dear Abdullah, I am here. The game is up, I suggest you give yourself up to me and I will take care of you.'²¹

General Niazi accepted the offer to surrender around 1045 hours on 16 December 1971. The 2 Para (Maratha) was the first to enter Dhaka.

MEGHNA CROSSING: HELIBORNE OPERATIONS—LIEUTENANT GENERAL SAGAT SINGH'S MASTERSTROKE

If any one victory in battle were to be rated as the greatest victory in the history of warfare ever since man started recording history, then the criteria for judging it must be based on the following parameters:

- The final outcome of victory in battle.
- The comparative strength of the opposing forces.
- The losses in men and material.
- The time interval between conception, planning, execution and victory.²²

If the above factors are to be considered, then the crossing on 9 December 1971 of the mighty Meghna by the Indian Army and Indian Air Force has to rank as one of the greatest and most brilliant feats of arms by any army and air force in the world since the dawn of history. No other single victory in battle has had a more profound an effect on the history of nations and humankind than this battle. In one swift masterstroke of brilliant conception, planning and execution, which from the beginning to the end was over in one day, a small force of a few hundred brave soldiers and 12 helicopters and their valiant crew created conditions for the liberation of an entire country and its hundred million

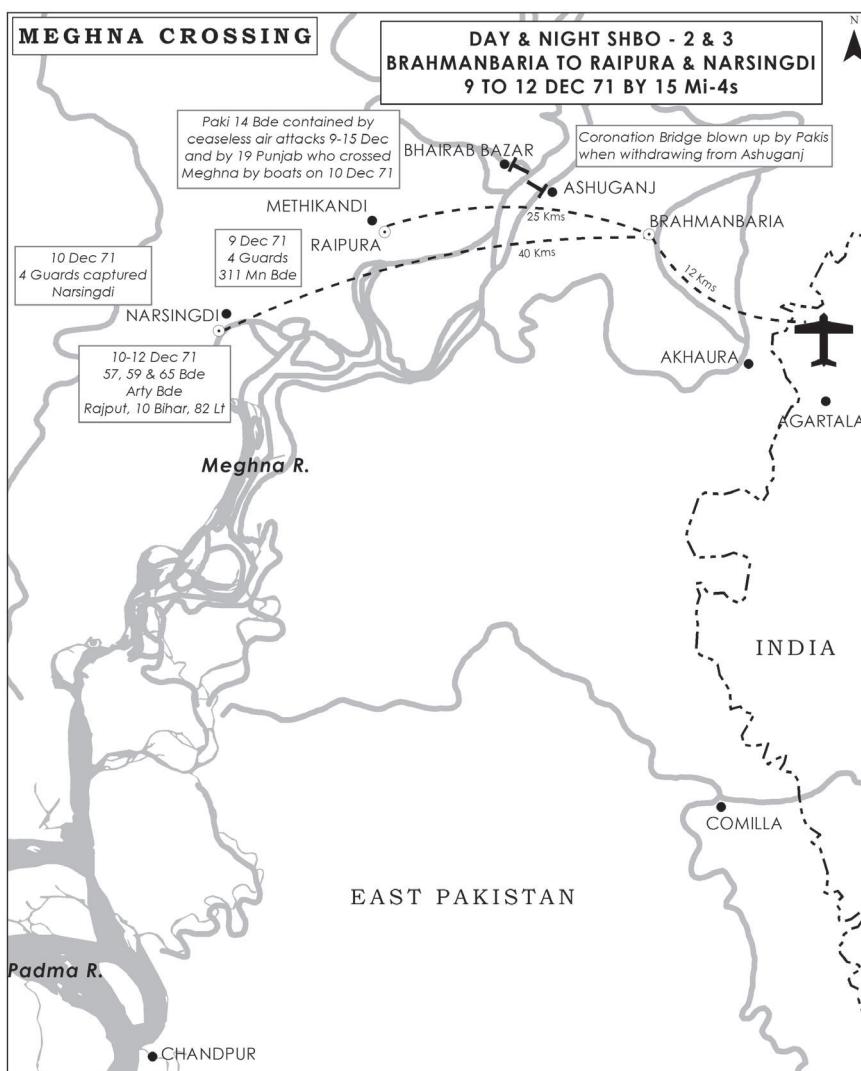
citizens from the yoke of tyranny and forced an enemy army of over hundred thousand soldiers, sailors, and airmen to seek an abject ceasefire and surrender. This victory in a single operation helped create a new nation, Bangladesh, which had never before existed in history.²³

Special Heliborne Operations (SHBO) was an emerging concept in the Indian Armed Forces in 1971. Lieutenant General Sagat Singh, one of the primary architects of the victory in the war, in an audacious manoeuvre employed infantry units and support arms to capture and establish a series of bridgeheads on the rivers in the assault and capture of Dacca. The most daring of these moves was the SHBO across the mighty Meghna river, which changed the course of the war. General Singh was a paratrooper, having had the distinction of commanding the coveted 50 (Independent) Parachute Brigade of Indian Army. Though belonging to the Gorkha Regiment, he completed his parachute jumps as Brigade Commander. He also led the Parachute Brigade in Operation Vijay, the liberation of Goa in 1961. Adept at seeking opportunities and thinking out of the box, he planned and executed the heli-lift across the Meghna river. Detailed planning, inter- and intra-service coordination, staff work, and training are essential to successfully execute an SHBO, and especially so with untrained infantry units and formations. But in 1971, General Singh practically pulled it off all by himself, along with a handful of his staff officers, Group Captain Chandan Singh, and his small Air Force of 12 Mi-4 helicopters. Sumit Walia writes in the *Indian Defence Review*:

One wonders how did they manage to advance 110 miles in 13 days over 5 water obstacles – the toughest being the river Meghna which was 2.5 times wider than the Brahmaputra river. It was perhaps the widest river crossing conducted ever, that too while the enemy was present on both sides of river!²⁴

It came naturally to General Singh to keep scanning the ongoing battles in his area of operations for any opportunity to exploit. When he saw a small window of opportunity, he took a calculated risk and ordered the first heliborne operation in the history of the Indian Army. Using just 10 Mi-4 helicopters (under the command of Group Captain Chandan Singh), he got a battalion (4/5 Gorkha Rifles) heli-lifted in Sylhet. Emboldened by its success, he got a whole division landed across Meghna while the Pakistani forces sitting in Bhairab Bazar watched the spectacle—a remarkable feat that no one ever imagined. Readers

must note that such humongous operations need meticulous planning at the Corps or Command level, followed by sand-model discussions and exercises.²⁵ He used innovative campaign strategies to dislocate and surprise an already weakened adversary into complete capitulation. He was helped in great measure by the successful para-drop at Tangail, north of Dhaka, and the series of heliborne operations across the Meghna



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Map 2 Meghna Crossing

river at Narsingdi and further north at Sylhet, all of which caused a psychological collapse in Dhaka, brought on by what is called in military parlance ‘vertical envelopment’ (Map 2). Adding to General Niazi’s woes was the constant bombing by the Indian Air Force and the pressure kept up on the coastal bastion of Chittagong by the Indian Navy.²⁶

For the fall of Dhaka, it was essential to capture the heavily fortified city of Comilla, in the Chittagong division. The 57 Mountain Division had advanced and captured territories up to the Meghna river by 8 December; however, the Ashuganj bridge on the Meghna river was a major obstacle to be captured, secured, and crossed to maintain the momentum of advance. The enemy too had appreciated the value of holding the bridge in strength, and thus, the bridge was heavily fortified and defended. Assault across a river obstacle, especially a river like Meghna, which is 4,000 yards wide at the narrowest point, posed a major challenge. Any attack would be very costly and time-consuming. The advance of II Corps had also been stalled by a resolute defence by the enemy at Kushtia. Even when captured, the construction of a new bridge by army engineers would take unduly long, thus jeopardising the success of the war, which was time-sensitive, as international pressure led by the US for a ceasefire was gaining traction. General Sagat Singh then came up with the plan to heli-lift troops across the Meghna—success would ensure a quick culmination of the war, failure, however, would lead to a very high cost not only in terms of casualties but also as a failure to achieve the core objective of the capture of Dhaka. There were only 12 Mi-4 Soviet-built helicopters capable of carrying a maximum of 14 troops in one sortie. The infantry element being heli-lifted would be without any artillery support. Against all odds, the largest heli-lift by India thus was put into motion in a bold plan on 9 December, taking the enemy by surprise. ‘Who Dares Wins’ is the motto of the paratroopers.

The plan envisaged to lift troops in the available 12 Mi-4 helicopters from Raipura, on the southern side of Ashuganj bridge, and drop them north of Meghna at Narsingdi, thus facilitating the advance to Dhaka. This axis was lightly held by the Pakistan Army secure in the belief that the Indian Army will not be able to cross the mighty Meghna. The amphibious PT-76 tanks were tasked to ford across the Meghna and give direct fire support to the troops being heli-lifted. Group Captain Chandan Singh led the heliborne force employing the available Mi-4s. The 4/5 Gorkha Rifles, also known as the Sylhet Gorkhas, were lifted on the night of 9 December to Raipura. They faced resistance from the

Pakistan Army units deployed to defend the crossing. However, with the fire support and unmatched grit, they held on to their objective. In a non-stop ferry by the helicopters, 311 Infantry Brigade was heli-lifted in 110 sorties over a period of 36 hours. The Mi-4 helicopters, which are designed to carry a maximum of 14 troops, carried 23 in some sorties. This is one of the largest airlifts of troops in military history. On securing Raipura, the troops were again airlifted to secure Narsingdi. One of the most successful airlifts ever in military history was carried out, giving the Indian Army full access to Dhaka.²⁷

The Meghna SHBO resulted in the complete collapse of the Pakistan Army in the East, leading to their ultimate surrender and liberation of Bangladesh. The Meghna crossing is unique in many ways, planned at the operational level with minimum resources and no support from outside the corps, executed with unprecedented speed, surprising the enemy, resulting in a complete collapse of the enemy's defensive battle. Speed was the essence that ensured success in face of odds—speed in decision making, speed in planning and in execution. The operation was planned and executed without any clearances from either the Service Headquarters or the Headquarters Command at Kolkata controlling the theatre. The most important aspect of the operation is the fact that despite the high risk, the casualties to own troops were negligible. The Mukti Bahini, in no small measure, contributed to the success with full support, creating chaos and delay among the enemy, and providing accurate intelligence. The SHBO by IV Corps under the leadership of the charismatic General Sagat Singh led to the eventual and early fall of Dacca.

THE RAID ON CHACHRO

The raid on Chachro military installations nearly 75 km deep inside Pakistan was a classic special operation. It was in the manner as conceptualised and conducted by Major David Sterling, popularly known as the 'Phantom Major'—he was adept at conducting vehicle-bound raids deep inside German positions, thus raising the Germans' costs for defending their installations and badly impacting troop morale and the decision-making abilities of the generals. The raid on Chachro by 10 Para Commando commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Bhawani Singh, belonging to the erstwhile royal family of Jaipur, had a strategic impact on the war in the Western Sector. The classic 'raid', immaculately planned and executed, shattered the morale of the enemy, and created

a decision dilemma for the Pakistan Army generals at the highest level. They grappled to discern the strategic intent of the Indian military in intervening deep inside West Pakistan, exposing the many weaknesses in their defences, as also the need to guard various military installations and echelons, thus diverting combat power from the primary role. Detailed planning, coordination and training are the prerequisites for the success of any special operation, especially one deep inside enemy territory. Among special forces operatives, such missions are euphemistically called ‘a one-way ticket’.

Brigadier Abraham Chacko, who was then a newly minted subaltern in 10 Para Commando, writes:

It was in December 1970, that we had the Army Chief, Sam Manekshaw, who came to spend half a day with us at Nasirabad. There was a close door meeting in the Commanding Officer’s office, followed by a visit to the training area where we showed him demolition techniques and Heliborne deployment from a mock up helicopter. Immediately, after this visit, Bhawani went to Delhi. The tasks for the Paltan was evolving because two chiefs’ visit to a unit at Nasirabad, which only had a Brigade HQ, could not have been a coincidence.²⁸

The 10 Para Commando was mobilised to train and prepare for a deep vehicle-borne insertion into Pakistan in September 1971. The mission given to the commandos was:²⁹

- Charlie Team to infiltrate along the Sarup Ka Tala and ginger up Ranger Wing Headquarters at Chachro by first light 7 December 1971.
- Alpha Team to disrupt lines of communication along Chachro–Umarkot axis and, if possible, destroy bridges along the canal in the green belt.
- Bravo Team to raid and destroy two rail bridges in general area Rahim Yar Khan to aid the advance of 12 Infantry Division along Tanot–Kishangarh–Islamgarh–Rahim Yar Khan.

Lieutenant Colonel Bhawani Singh’s leadership was mainly instrumental in the success of the mission. He conceptualised the exact role and missions of the unit, properly equipped the troops with the requisite wherewithal to carry out the assigned mission and ensured meticulous planning and preparation. He was a soldier extraordinaire. Though Colonel Megh Singh is considered the father of special operations

in India, it was Bhawani Singh who convinced Chief Sam Manekshaw on the strategic value of special operations. Brigadier Abraham Chacko writes about the great General Sam Manekshaw: 'If at any time you are tempted to feel scared, put your hands in your pocket and remember Sam. We firmly believed that no harm could come to us with him as our Chief.'³⁰

The Chachro raid was actually a 'diversionary' to cause confusion and decision dilemma in the Pakistan General Headquarters (GHQ) and keep the Pakistan forces tied down in time and space, thus ensuring that the Indian Army achieves its strategic objective of holding action along the Western Front. The Alpha and Charlie Teams spearheaded the operation to insert 80 km inside Pakistan territory by vehicles and carry out a raid on the Chachro garrison. As planned, the raids were timed with the commencement of the war, with orders to insert given on 4 December. The insertion was by jeeps specially modified to navigate the desert terrain. Surprising the enemy in a bold action, the commandos launched daylight raids to capture Virawah and Nagarparkar, followed by the raids on Islamkot and Lunio. During these operations, the speed and ferocity of the attacks forced the enemy to panic and flee despite having superiority in numbers and position. The militia groups tasked with defending this region also did not fare any better. Logistical difficulties and the brief duration of the war saw the Sindh campaign halt just short of Umarkot. However, by the end of the war, about 13,000 sq km of Sindh was in Indian hands.³¹ This was a dream special operation, creating havoc among the enemy ranks and a decision dilemma at the Pakistan GHQ. The excellent planning, preparation, equipping, training and the sheer audacity and ferocity ensured complete success. The best part was that the para commandos suffered no casualties. The unit was bestowed with the Battle Honour 'Chachro 1971' as well as with 10 gallantry awards. Lieutenant Colonel Bhawani Singh, the Commanding Officer, was awarded the Mahavir Chakra.

OPERATION MANDHOL: RAID BY 9 PARA COMMANDOS (9 PARA SF)

The military objective in the Western Front was clear: fight a holding, offensive-defensive operations in the west to tie down maximum combat potential. This would contribute to the early collapse of East Pakistan, leading to the liberation of Bangladesh. However, Pakistan too intended to defeat India's war aims, and hence, their strategy and objectives were:

- Carry the battle into Indian territory in the west to make it the main theatre of war, thus delaying the Indian offensive in the east, forcing an early ceasefire through US and China.
- Capture maximum territory in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in a swift operation.
- Launch offensive in Chamb to cut off J&K and in Poonch.

Surprising the enemy, India launched its first-ever Special Operations ‘Commando Raid’ by foot insertion along a heavily manned and mined Line of Control on Mandhol gun position in the Poonch Sector. Though a tactical-level operation, it had strategic ramifications, instilling fear in the enemy by sheer daring and ferocity of the raid, forcing a defensive mindset, thus stymying the Pakistan Army offensive. The preparation and planning of the raid by 9 Para Commando [9 Para (SF)] had commenced early with the deployment of the commandos in the Nangi Tekri battalion of Poonch, a position which afforded direct visibility into enemy territory and its actions.

The 9 Para Commando was assigned a commando mission to raid and destroy an enemy artillery gun position in Mandhol, approximately 19 km southwest of Poonch. The insertion was planned by foot across the Poonch river. Six 122mm Chinese guns of a Pakistani battery were effectively interfering with the operations of Indian 93 and 120 Infantry Brigades. Colonel K.D. Pathak, who was part of the raiding party, says, ‘We started around 5.30 pm on December 13 with one company comprising six officers and around 120 men of 9 Para Commando.’³² According to Colonel Pathak, it was a very cold night, and they had to cross the Poonch river on foot to reach Mandhol. On reaching, they found the village had been vacated. The commandos located the enemy guns with the help of an old man. The raiding party then split into six, with the task of destroying one gun each. After a fierce fight, the commandos succeeded in destroying all the guns. During the fight, many soldiers of the Pakistan Army were killed and several fled. ‘It was also an uphill task to return to our territory with wounded soldiers and the body of a soldier. Cots, taken from villages, were improvised and turned into stretchers to carry the wounded soldiers. We reached back at our post at 6.30 am.’³³

Apart from the destruction of guns, ammunition and other vital equipment, the Pakistanis suffered 37 killed and 41 wounded. This raid, launched at a crucial time to enable India’s 25 Infantry Division to progress the operations for the capture of Daruchian (a Pakistan-occupied post). The 9 Para Commandos suffered 16 casualties: two fatal,

14 wounded. For overall operations in this sector, the Para Commandos were awarded the Battle Honour 'Defence of Poonch' in the 1971 war. This is the only classical raid ever executed by the Indian special forces.³⁴

The Indian Army, impressed by the unprecedented success of the raid, planned to disrupt the enemy at other locations. The C Team of 9 Para Commando was attached to 80 Infantry Brigade, Naushera Sector, on 17 December for a repeat performance at Chauki. But after the troops had moved to the forward assembly areas, the operation was called off due to the ceasefire.³⁵

Though a tactical operation, the Mandhol raid had strategic implications. The raid instilled fear, demoralising Pakistan troops, and forcing them to deploy additional forces on protection and security duties to defend their installations and gun areas. This also led to the delay of a planned Pakistan offensive in the sector. It had so deep an impact on the Pakistan Army that it had to raise a second line of troops to secure their artillery guns, thereby making a change in its war doctrine.³⁶

MUKTI BAHINI

The contribution of the Mukti Bahini in the liberation war has unfortunately been overshadowed by India's unprecedented victory, especially so in the final stages of the war. The key role of the Mukti Bahini was definitely a battle-winning factor. Beginning as the Mukti Fauj, the Mukti Bahini was born soon after the Pakistan Army unleashed mass rape and genocide on 25 March 1971 (Operation Searchlight). By the end of April, the number of volunteers who joined the Mukti Bahini was close to 2,50,000.

The Mukti Fauj was divided into 11 operational sectors, most of them along the periphery of the Indo-Bangladesh border. Each sector was allotted, on average, 2,000–3,000 sector troops and 6,000–7,000 guerrillas of the Gano Bahini. The operational policies were formulated by India's Eastern Command and the headquarters of Bangladesh Forces, and their implementation was entrusted to sector commanders. Although the Mukti Fauj and the East Bengal Rifles battalions fought pitched battles with the Pakistan Army, it was the Gano Bahini branch of the Mukti Bahini consisting of guerrillas that inflicted the greatest damage deep inside East Bengal. It was this guerrilla force that kept the Pakistan Army on tenterhooks.³⁷

Mukti Jodhas of the Mukti Bahini struck deep inside East Pakistan, destroying command and communication networks and systems,

bridges, railway network, administrative installations and infrastructure. They were a force multiplier supporting the Indian Armed Forces in all domains. The intelligence and local support they provided were critical not only to the overall war effort but also, in particular, in the planning and execution of special operations. It is not possible to detail the many operations and contributions of the Mukti Bahini. Suffice it to say that they were a battle-winning factor.

CONCLUSION

The 1971 India–Pakistan war is a must-study for military practitioners and strategists the world over. The Indian Armed Forces, with effective support from the Mukti Bahini, captured a well-defended and fortified East Pakistan riddled with massive river systems within a span of 13 days, which was akin to the 1939 German Blitzkrieg in World War II. The meticulous planning and the sheer audacity in the execution of special operations impacted the course of the war. The Indian Armed Forces achieved the derived military objectives in totality, thus ensuring the desired political end-state. Bangladesh was liberated at the end of the 13-day war after Indian troops entered Dhaka on 16 December 1971 to accept the surrender of nearly 93,000 troops of the Pakistan Army as prisoners of war.

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