

# Battle of Bogra

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## Introduction

Bogra is a district and city in Rajshahi division in northern Bangladesh. Today, it is industrial city and nerve centre of north Bangladesh, also referred to as the gateway to north Bengal. It was also the site of one of the most pitched battles in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War for the liberation of Bangladesh. The Battle of Bogra

Fig 1



is often considered an extension of the hard-fought and famous Battle of Hilli, which started with the attack on Hilli, a border village, 60 km as the crow flies northwest of Bogra, on November 23, 1971. What is significant about Hilli and Bogra, unlike in many other sectors, is that the Pakistani troops fought hard before ultimately giving in to the Indian Army's determined thrust. This is borne out by the fact that Pakistan's highest military award for bravery was awarded in Hilli. 5/11 Gorkha Rifles, was part of 20 Indian Mountain Division and distinguished itself by its actions, ultimately leading to the capture of Bogra, which coincided with the end of the 13-day decisive war. Three officers who fought the battle rose to be Lieutenant Generals, a no mean feat. On the Pakistan side, 205 Infantry Brigade commanded by Brig Tajammul Hussain Malik, who was responsible for the defence of Hilli and Bogra, was said to have goaded his soldiers to stand and fight, and himself refused to surrender to the Indian Army. He was, however, captured trying to escape.

**Pakistan had adopted Fortress Concept as a strategy for defence in East Pakistan.**

### **North Western Sector**

The north western sector of erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) included the area north of the River Padma and west of the River Jamuna. Bogra was an important communication hub connecting the northwest and western sectors through the Hardinge Bridge over the Padma. The Siliguri corridor, vital for road and rail communication with eastern India, borders the northern tip of this sector. Pakistan had adopted the "Fortress Concept" as the strategy for the defence of East Pakistan. It implied that important identified border towns and communication centres such as Jessore, Jhenida, Bogra, Rangpur, Jamalpur, Mymensingh, Sylhet, Bhairab Bazar, Comilla and Chittagong were strengthened into defended 'fortresses' to stop and destroy advancing Indian columns, fighting "last man, last round".

During the 1971 build-up to war, the sector was defended by Pakistan's 16 Infantry Division. The division with its Headquarters (HQ) at Nator (southwest of Bogra), had under its command 23 Infantry Brigade in Dinajpur-Rangpur area, 34 Infantry Brigade in Rajshahi-Naogaon (area west and southwest of Bogra) and 205 Infantry Brigade commanded by Brig Tajammul Hussain Malik in Hilli-Ghoraghat. 205 Infantry Brigade comprised 32 Baluch in Ghoraghat-Gobindaganj area, 4 Frontier Force (FF) in Hilli area, 8 Baluch in Jaipurhat-Jaipur and Mahabatpur and a company of 34 Punjab in Panchbibi area.<sup>1</sup>Bogra fell in this area.

## **Indian Offensive**

33 Corps was responsible for operations in the northwest sector of East Pakistan. The area of operation of 33 Corps included Rajshahi, Bogra, Dinajpur and Rangpur districts. The order of battle of 33 Corps was 71 Mountain Brigade, 20 Mountain Division, 6 Mountain Division and 9 Mountain Brigade. 20 Mountain Division was commanded by Maj Gen Lachhman Singh Lehl and integral to it were 202 Mountain Brigade, 165 Mountain Brigade and 66 Mountain Brigade with 340 Mountain Brigade Group under its command for operations. By December 03, Indian forces were already in occupation of certain areas in this sector, which were captured as part of preliminary operations. In Hilli, for instance, 202 Brigade had captured some parts of the main defences of 4 FF on November 23-24, 1971, though Hilli was still holding out. Similarly, other brigades had advanced or contacted areas just north of line Dinajpur (upto Thakurgaon)-Saidpur-Rangpur-Kaunia up to the River Jamuna (Kurigram).<sup>2</sup>

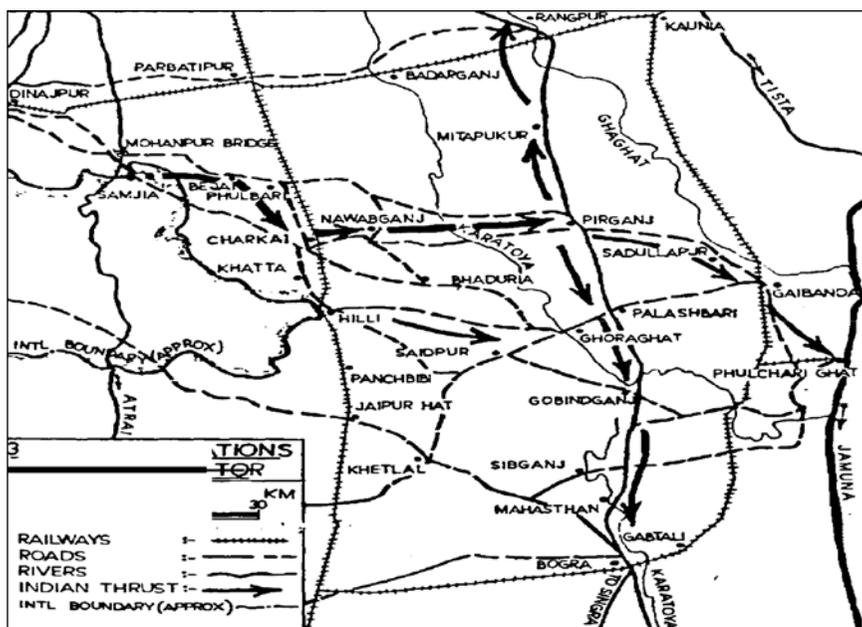
## **Plan of Operation of 33 Corps**

33 Corps' strategy was to secure the waist line along the Hilli-Gaibanda axis in the middle of the sector on axis Mohanpur bridge-Gaibanda-Bogra. This would divide Pakistan 16 Infantry Division as also provide protection to the Siliguri corridor. Subsequently, piecemeal destruction of the Pakistani forces north and south of this waist line could be undertaken. During the preliminary operations, it was evident that a frontal attack on Hilli would be costly in terms of resources, Pakistani forces having held on resolutely. Gen Lehl was against any frontal advance along the strongly defended approach from Hilli to Ghoraghat, and also against getting involved in fighting in Dinajpur town. The operational plan, thus, devolved on cutting the Hilli-Gaibanda waistline by advancing on axis Mohanpur Bridge-Phulbari-Charkai-Pirganj-Palashbari with two brigades, then having secured Gaibanda, advancing south on Palashbari-Gobindaganj-Bogra.

- 340 Mountain Brigade Group: One battalion to contain Dinajpur from the south and the balance of the brigade to act as reserve.
- 202 Mountain Brigade: Continue operations to attack Hilli to deceive Pakistan into believing that the Indian intention was to advance along Hilli-Gaibanda, then link up with 66 Brigade in area Dangapara-Charkai after handing over the defence of Hilli to 165 Mountain Brigade.
- 66 Mountain Brigade: Advance north of Hilli to capture Phulbari and Charkai by December 04, 1971.

- 6 Mountain Division and 71 Mountain Brigade would be employed in the north. 9 Mountain Brigade was to clear the Teesta pocket around Kaunia and be ready for operations with 20 Mountain Division or 71 Mountain Brigade. Concurrently, there were plans to contain and degrade Pakistan 205 Infantry Brigade in the Hilli-Ghoraghat-Khetlal area before finally capturing Gobindganj and Bogra by D Plus 9.<sup>3</sup>

Fig 2



### Progress of Operations: Advance to Bogra

202 Mountain Brigade in Hilli area commenced its advance to Bogra via Khetlal on December 12. On December 13, 16 Rajput with Alfa Squadron of 63 CAVALRY (CAV) and 69 Armoured Regiment under command advanced on the Ghoraghat-Saidpur-Khetlal axis. By the time Khetlal was contacted at 1930 hours, Pakistani troops had already vacated the area, damaging in their wake the track and bridges to Bogra. With its allotted squadron of 63 CAV planned to be diverted to the Punjab theatre for operations, 202 Mountain Brigade was tasked to firm in on Khetlal-Gobindganj axis as a divisional reserve and capture of Bogra was allotted to 340 Mountain Brigade Group who were advancing down the Nawabganj-Pirganj-Gobindganj axis.<sup>4</sup>



firm in and attempt to ascertain more details of the enemy before clearing them. The command of the advance guard was accordingly handed over to Commanding Officer 5/11 GR Lt Col FT Dias. Alfa and Delta Companies, under Maj JBS Yadava and Maj AS Mamik respectively, were tasked to secure the northern banks of the Nala to the west and east. Despite heavy fire, a foothold on the northern bank was established at 1900 hours on December 12, 1971. Further patrolling revealed the presence of two regular companies of 32 Baluch – one in Saulakandi and one in Malahar. Under cover of darkness, Maj JBS Yadava with Alfa Company infiltrated the gap between the two defended localities and established a roadblock in depth, capturing what turned out to be the Battalion HQ of 32 Baluch, along with four officers, including the officiating Commanding Officer (CO), and two other ranks. 32 Baluch attempted to dislodge Maj Yadava's company, but effective fire brought down by the Indian artillery rendered many enemy dead. The forward companies were then attacked. First Delta Company, under heavy opposition, managed to cross the Nala under Maj Mamik and overran the enemy defences by 1000 hours, December 13, after three hours of fierce hand-to-hand khukri engagements moving from bunker to bunker. Now even as Bravo Company formed up to attack the enemy company in Malahar, the enemy abandoned the defences, withdrawing towards Bogra. Of the Pakistani force holding the area, a total of four officers, one Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) and 12 Other Ranks (ORs) were captured, and 97 killed while 5/11 GR suffered three killed and 16 wounded. By 1300 hours, Charlie Company under Maj Pathania resumed the advance towards Bogra and was tasked to capture intact a bridge at Mahasthan over the Karatoya River, some 10 km north of Bogra. Upon nearing the bridge, they were subject to heavy enemy fire. However, the Gorkhas closed in and the leading section commander Nk Bir Bahadur Magar rushed to the bridge, and displaying guts, speed and presence of mind, engaged the Pakistani demolition party attempting to blow up the bridge, and using a khukri, cut the leads to the demolition. The bridge was captured intact and Bogra was in sight.

**Integration of all arms was a key to success in battle.**

## **Battle of Bogra**

After the above actions, 5/11 GR was placed as reserves. 2/5 GR (FF), another Gorkha battalion, led the advance with 69 Armoured Regiment and 6 GUARDS. The Pakistani force assessed to be holding Bogra consisted of 8 Baluch, some tanks and artillery; HQ 205 Infantry Brigade and possibly Tac HQ 16 Infantry Division were also located inside. On December 13/14, night, 69 Armoured

Regiment less a squadron, with 6 GUARDS less a company under its command, carried out an outflanking move from the east and established roadblocks on roads Bogra-Sirajganj (southeast of Bogra) and Bogra-Singra (southwest of Bogra). On December 14, Bogra was attacked from two directions – 69 Armoured Regiment from the south of Bogra and 2/5 GR (FF) with Alfa Squadron 63 CAV from the north. Both attacks met with stiff Pakistani resistance in the built-up area. However, after fierce fighting, by 1300 hours, all areas north of the railway line had been cleared. However, isolated pockets of the town, including the town centre (hereafter referred to as crossroads) were holding out. 5/11 GR was now tasked to clear the obstinate enemy pockets inside Bogra; area crossroads, area Bogra railway station (west of the crossroads), area between Circuit House (south of crossroads) and west upto the railway station. Commencing their advance at 0930 hours on December 15, Alfa Company reached Bogra station where they came under heavy enemy fire. The battle raged on the entire day. By last light, Alfa Company managed to secure the railway station. Charlie Company, in the meanwhile, had resumed advance on the road Malgram-Circuit House towards the crossroads. On reaching short of area crossroads, they encountered enemy opposition from buildings on either side of the street. After fierce street fighting, Charlie Company succeeded in clearing enemy opposition upto the crossroads. At the crossroads, Capt MS Pathania was killed while assaulting an enemy position. Delta Company was ordered to relieve the pressure on Charlie Company. After bitter and fierce house-to-house fighting, they were able to advance to the crossroads by last light. By last light of December 15, 1971, the battalion had succeeded in securing the area west of road Bogra-Sirajganj up to the line Railway Station-Circuit House. From the fierce resistance put up by the enemy at the crossroads, it was apparent that the location was very strongly held. It later emerged that HQ 205 Infantry Brigade and 8 Baluch were deployed in the town. A Company of 4 FF and one Company of 13 Engineer Battalion too were deployed in area crossroads.

At the end of the fighting, 5/11 GR was able to capture nine officers, six JCOs and 212 ORs from various units and headquarters and recovered a large quantity of arms, ammunition, vehicles and equipment. While the battle seemed to have ceased by 0930 hours on December 16, Pakistan 205 Infantry Brigade Commander, Brig Tajammul Malik, having obviously decided not to surrender, was captured trying to escape. At 1300 hours on December 18, 1971, Maj Gen Nazar Hussain Shah, GOC 16 Pakistan Infantry Division, was flown from Nator to sign the instrument of surrender before Maj Gen Lachhman Singh Lehl, VrC, GOC 20 Mountain Division, at Bogra.

Capt MS Pathania, Lt Y Babu Rao and 17 OR of the battalion attained martyrdom during these operations. Three officers, two JCOs and 46 ORs were wounded. 5/11 GR was officially recognised for its contribution by the awards of three Vir Chakras (Lt Col F T Dais, Maj A S Mamik and Maj JBS Yadava), three Sena Medals (2/Lt T S Bedi, Nk Bir Bahadur Magar and L/Nk Dhan Raj Rai, SM) and three Mention-in-Despatches (Nk Nanda Lal Limbu, Rfn Chakra Bahadur Rai and Rfn Lal Bahadur Rai), **Battle Honour 'BOGRA'** and **Theatre Honour 'EAST PAKISTAN'**. Capt Surjit Parmar of 64 Mountain Regiment, Forward Observation Officer for the operations at Saulakandi, was also awarded a Vir Chakra for his daring use of artillery in such close proximity of own troops.

## **Conclusion**

Relentless offensive action, quick identification and exploiting of opportunities, determination, superior leadership, decentralised execution under the initiative of junior leaders, cooperation with other arms, flexibility and surprise and display of personal bravery in the face of a tenacious enemy were some of the ingredients in the recipe which served up the final dish of crowning success for 5/11 GR in the Battle for Bogra. Offensive spirit was embodied in the northwest sector itself, in the capture of Hilli, which preceded the Bogra operation, which is accepted to be one of the fiercest battles fought between the Indian and Pakistani Armies in 1971. In so far as seizing the initiative, maintaining contact and momentum of operations were concerned, this was clearly manifest in all the operations of 5/11 GR; right from the time they entered the theatre, from Nawabganj to Bogra, all the way, as they advanced relentlessly, clearing opposition and capturing objectives assigned to them at Pirganj, Gobindganj, Saulakandi, Mahasthan and, finally, Bogra. Their infiltration of the gap between defended localities at Saulakandi to establish a roadblock and opportunistically capture the enemy's Battalion HQ remains a classic example of surprise and exploitation of an opportunity and cooperation with artillery, not to mention the personal bravery of all ranks. That they not only meshed, but operated successfully with armour and artillery speaks much of the formation's and battalion's integration with the other arms. Ultimately, pure grit, determination and the sterling leaders of 5/11 GR were what laid the foundation for this outstanding action and paved the way for the divisional advance and the subsequent capture of Bogra.

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## Notes

1. *OFFICIAL 1971 WAR HISTORY* © History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India accessed from <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/LAND-FORCES/Army/History/1971War/PDF/>
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Battalion History of 5/11 Gorkha Rifles. Subsequent narrations of the Battle of Bogra have been sourced mostly from the Battalion History obtained from the battalion with inputs from *The Path of Glory: Exploits of The 11 Gorkha Rifles* and *OFFICIAL 1971 WAR HISTORY* © History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India.
6. Lt Col Gautam Sharma (Retd), *The Path of Glory: Exploits of The 11 Gorkha Rifles* (Ahmedabad: Allied Publishers, 1998), p. 117.