



India celebrates its 59th Republic Day amid pomp, pageantry, pays tributes to martyrs



(From right) President Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil, Chief Guest and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Vice-President Mohammad Hamid Ansari and Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh at the dais during the 59th Republic Day Parade in New Delhi on January 26.

A grand parade showcasing India's military might, vibrant economy and rich diversity marked the 59th Republic Day, celebrated in New Delhi on January 26, with Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil becoming the first woman President to take the salute. She also became the first female head of state to unfurl the national tricolor of the world's largest democracy on its most revered national day.

Early in the morning, people from all walks of life thronged Rajpath, a two-mile boulevard from the Rashtrapati Bhavan to the India Gate War Memorial, and the parade route up to the Red Fort in the Old City to witness the 105-minute regimental march on one of the coldest Republic Days in recent memory.

The spectators watched in awe as war machines rolled down the stately road along with the marching contingents of the three wings of the military, paramilitary forces, colourful tableaux and school students.

About 7,000 men, women and school students took part in the parade. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who was on his maiden visit to India on January 25, was the guest of honour on the occasion.

Ahead of the parade, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh visited the India Gate

War Memorial to pay homage to the Unknown Soldiers. He then returned to the dais at Rajpath to receive President Patil, the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and Sarkozy.

A variety of new military equipment, such as an indigenously-developed Experimental Tank, the awesome T-90 Main Battle Tank (MBT) and a mobile launcher for the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, was on display for the first time at the parade. A 12-barrelled Smerch rocket launcher, a Tungska air defence gun, a Sarvatra bridge-layer tank, an upgraded 155mm Soltom howitzer and a mobile system to enable the conduct of network-centric warfare were among the other military equipment showcased during the parade. Besides, military bands played rousing music to add to the grandeur of the occasion. Following them were 1,900 cadets of the National Cadet Corps. Some marched in contingents of 12x12 while others were dressed in traditional costumes, showcasing different dance forms of India.

The marching contingents of paramilitary and other auxiliary civil forces included contingents from the Border Security Force, Assam Rifles, Coast Guard, Central Reserve Police Force, Indo-Tibetan Border Police, Central Industrial Security Force,

Sashastra Seema Bal, Railway Protection Force, Delhi Police, National Cadet Corps and the National Service Scheme. The camel-mounted band also participated.

This set the stage for a cultural pageant featuring 26 floats mounted by 16 states, nine Central ministries and the Central Public Works Department, which stole the show with its floral depiction of the Red Fort. The tableau of Jammu and Kashmir, which recreated a tulip garden, and that of Meghalaya, based on the theme of "Beautiful Butterflies", too, stood out.

About 1,800 schoolchildren from the Delhi region staged a variety of folk and traditional dances. The popular display of daredevilry on motorcycles by the Border Security Force personnel and a flypast featuring Sukhoi Su-30 combat jets, Il-76 heavy lift transporters and a Mi-26, the world's largest helicopter, made up for the grand finale.

President Patil posthumously awarded the Ashok Chakra, the country's highest award for gallantry during peacetime, to three army personnel, Col. V. Vasanth, Capt. Harshan R. and Naib Subedar Chuni Lal. All the three officers were killed in counter-insurgency operations in Jammu and Kashmir. ■