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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 Tanguiska 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. ■

INDIAN EMBASSY IN KABUL celebrates 59th R-Day in style



Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan Jayant Prasad reading out the President's Address to the Nation.

The Indian Embassy in Kabul celebrated the 59th Republic Day on January 26 with fervour and gaiety.

Although it was an unusually cold morning, over 200 Indians gathered in the courtyard of the Indian Embassy to attend the function. Ambassador Jayant Prasad unfurled the flag, read out the President's Address to the Nation, delivered on the eve of the Republic Day, and briefly spoke to the gathering. He said that the Indian citizens in Afghanistan were on a mission to forge and

nurture the closest possible friendship between India and Afghanistan and to promote the unity, integrity and progress of Afghanistan through the social and economic development of the Afghan people.

Besides members of the Mission and Indian nationals and persons of Indian origin in Kabul, Indian personnel working on different assistance projects and with the Government of Afghanistan attended the grand event.

The main function was followed by a ren-

dition of patriotic songs in the Embassy auditorium. With guidance from Ustad Inder Bawra, students of music at the Indian Cultural Centre, Kabul, participated in the programme. The Centre also organised a screening of the Bollywood film, 'Chak de! India', in the evening, which was well attended and appreciated.

Flag-hoisting functions and receptions were also held at the Indian Consulates General in Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif. ■

Highlights of the President's Address to the nation on Republic Day eve



The formation of the Republic on January 26, 1950, was the first milestone in our march towards realising the dreams of our people in the aftermath of Independence. The journey has been long, but we have travelled far. Like any great journey, we have had our moments of triumph and glory as also our share of sorrows and travails. All along we had an abiding faith in the talent and resilience of the people of India. We were inspired during this journey by the values of freedom, tolerance and plurality, which have given to India its defining identity — a country with unity in diversity.

India, consisting of people with different religions, languages and customs, draws its inherent strength from each and everyone of its diverse units. Today, as a nation and as individual citizens, we must pledge to uphold this spirit of solidarity and respect for the multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic character of India.

We are the largest democracy in the world and one of the most stable. We have held 14 General Elections to Parliament, in which

power has been transferred to different political parties and groups according to the mandate of the people. Our vibrant and functioning democracy has won universal applause. Today, there are 3.2 million representatives who have been elected from villages, towns and cities. We are also proud that 1.2 million of these elected representatives are women. This is by far the largest number of elected representatives ever in history, or anywhere in the contemporary world.

Our economy is growing at unprecedented rates, and we can be confident that we will be able to achieve the growth targets we have set for ourselves. The impressive strides of the Indian economy have resulted in the emergence of India as a powerful player in the global economy. This century will belong to Asia and India will be one of the main driving forces. It is now time for realising India's tryst with destiny.

As development takes place, we should not forget that the objective is not merely to create wealth. It should be to build a humane society. We must preserve and pro-

tect our rich cultural heritage and its values of compassion and harmonious living. In the joy of song and dance, painting and sculpture, literature and poetry, we should discover and imbibe the best that has been passed on to us from generation to generation over millennia.

India has always had a vision and a message for the world. From the very beginning of our civilisation, we have believed that the world is one and humanity is a single family. India is committed to establish ties of friendship and co-operation with all countries. India's engagement with the world is intensifying both in the economic and political fields. India is a country that has, and is, contributing to regional and global peace and stability.

Today, terrorism constitutes a grave threat to the civilised world. The continuing terrorist attacks are reminders of the need to take collective action. India will continue to work with the international community to create a better world — a world free of terror, poverty, disease, ignorance and inequality. ■

Manmohan visits China to bolster a mutually beneficial relationship



Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and his Chinese counterpart, Wen Jiabao, address a joint press conference at the Great Hall of People in Beijing on January 14.

Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh on January 15 wrapped up a path-breaking trip to China by seeking improved, all-round ties between two of the world's fastest growing economies and calling for a timeframe to end their border dispute.

During his three-day visit, Singh held talks with his Chinese counterpart, Wen Jiabao, and the chemistry between the two leaders was palpable. The two countries pledged to take their two-way trade to a new high of \$60 billion by 2010. They deepened their new-found military ties and signed 11 pacts covering a range of areas. A vision statement outlined their strategic roadmap.

The agreements cover a wide spectrum, from economic planning and housing to health and culture. The Chinese print and electronic media gave prominent coverage to Singh's maiden visit to Beijing, and by the time he boarded Air India One to head home, Chinese experts on Asia were praising him profusely. Rong Ying, director of the South Asian Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), described Singh as a "highly regarded and respected" man.

Hours before his departure, Singh addressed a gathering of Chinese intellectuals and urged that India and China should be at the forefront of the emergence of a more democratic international order. He declared that the UN Security Council no longer reflected the global reality. China holds a permanent seat in the Security Council, a status that India desires.

China said that it "understands and sup-

ports India's aspirations to play a greater role in the UN including in the Security Council". Indian officials described this stand as a marked step forward on Beijing's part.

Singh also told the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) that India and China, which account for a third of the world's population, needed to cooperate "in creating a world of positive externalities and mutual prosperity, rather than one based on balance of power calculations and animosity.

This involves India and China working together closely to ensure a global order in which our simultaneous development will have a positive influence not only on our own economies but also on the rest of the world."

An agreement which Singh and Wen signed after the bilateral talks made it clear that it was time to build "a relationship of friendship and trust, based on equality, in which each is sensitive to the concerns and aspirations of the other". It said India-China ties were not targeted at any country.

The two countries agreed to hold their second joint military training exercises in India this year — the first such exercise took place in China in December last year. Besides revising their bilateral trade target for 2010, the two sides decided to establish a high-level Business Leaders Forum and hold the second India-China Defence Dialogue this year.

Indian Commerce Minister Kamal Nath pointed out that India and China comprised 40 percent of the world market. Knowing well that the world was watching his mission to Beijing, Singh declared: "India-China relations are of regional and global significance".

China is now India's second largest trade partner and poised to become the largest. India is China's tenth-largest trading ally. Although trade is the current highlight of their cooperation, the two governments also agree on issues such as energy security and conservation. The two are also coming together in third countries by forging strategic business partnerships. ■

Highlights of the Joint Declaration

- India and China resolve to promote a harmonious world of durable peace and common prosperity by developing a strategic and cooperative partnership.
- They recognise that both the countries bear a significant historical responsibility to ensure comprehensive, balanced and sustainable economic and social development and to promote peace and development in Asia and the world as a whole.
- Both sides favour an open and inclusive international system and believe that drawing lines on the ground of ideologies and values is not conducive to peaceful and harmonious co-existence.
- They support comprehensive reforms in the UN including according priority to increasing the representation of the developing countries in the Security Council.
- China attaches great importance to India's position as a major developing country in international affairs.
- China supports India's aspirations to play a greater role in the UN including the Security Council.
- Both sides will strengthen coordination under the framework of the Asia-Europe Meeting.
- They welcome the positive facets of economic globalisation.
- Both believe that the establishment of an open, fair, equitable, transparent and rule-based multilateral trading system.
- They are determined to strengthen their coordination with developing countries in order to secure shared objectives.
- They recognise the challenge that humankind faces from climate change.
- They strongly condemn the scourge of terrorism in all forms and manifestations.
- They will continuously promote confidence-building measures through steadily enhanced contacts in the field of defence.
- Both remain firmly committed to resolving differences, including the boundary dispute, through peaceful negotiations.
- Both sides also recognise their responsibilities and obligations in the international community.

Portrait presented to President Karzai



President Hamid Karzai looking at his portrait.

On the eve of his final departure from Afghanistan, outgoing Indian Ambassador Rakesh Sood presented a portrait of President Hamid Karzai painted by Sandeep Kumar, Minister at the Indian Embassy in Kabul, to Karzai at the Presidential Palace on January 9.

The painting depicts Karzai in his customary green chaupan with his right hand raised to the forehead in salutation in his affable trademark style. Kumar explained that his intention was not to make a portrait depicting the President's features in realistic detail. Rather it was an attempt to project President Karzai's indomitable spirit.

The oil painting, done in impressionist style, with a profusion of burnt brown, viridian green, golden orange, cerulean blue and

violet, is positive in interpretation, sending out a message of hope for the future. The President looks at his audience straight in the eye signifying pride, dignity and self-respect. The right hand is raised in salutation, communicating his greetings to the people of Afghanistan as well as to the outside world, as Afghanistan gains its rightful place in the comity of nations.

The dark brown background is indicative of the challenges faced by the President but this is offset against the golden orange and yellow bursting into the horizon, reflective of light and glory.

While receiving the painting, the President expressed his warm appreciation for the work, welcoming the message of hope and optimism.

The meeting with President Karzai was also an occasion for the Indian Ambassador to introduce the Afghan students of the Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) learning Indian classical music under the guidance of Indian maestro, Ustad Inder Singh Bawra. There are around 70 students at the ICC.

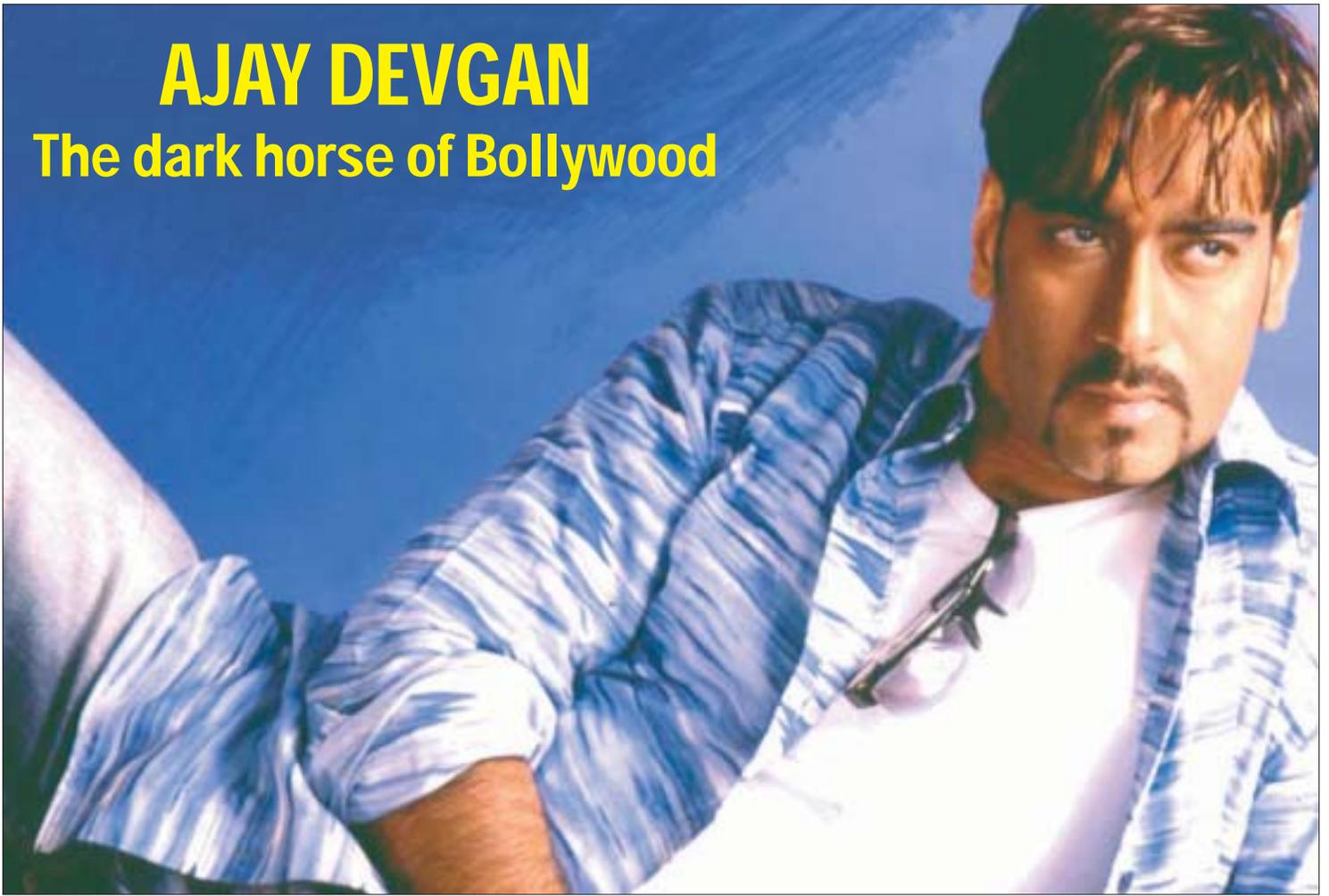
The President expressed his appreciation for the students who, within a period of a few months, had attained an impressive level of understanding in rendering Indian classical ragas.

He encouraged them to continue with the learning and help sustain the rich historical musical heritage of Afghanistan.

The Centre offers free music lessons and all are welcome. ■

AJAY DEVGAN

The dark horse of Bollywood



Amitabh Bachchan once called Ajay Devgan the “Dark Horse” of Bollywood. But he is also proving to be a winning tortoise with his slow and steady growth. He is on a roll. After a forgettable 2007, he has started off this year with a bang. The intense actor, who is known for breaking the rules now and then, first charmed critics with his power-packed performance in Rajkumar Santoshi’s ‘Halla Bol’. Now, he is trying to tickle the funny bone in Rohit Shetty’s ‘Sunday’.

His roles in both the films are in complete contrast with each other. In ‘Halla Bol’, he is an actor-turned-activist, while he plays a corrupt cop in the fun-filled action thriller ‘Sunday’. Soon, the actor will turn director with ‘U Me Aur Hum’, scheduled to release in April this year.

Once billed as the likely inheritor of the “angry young man” roles, immortalised by Amitabh Bachchan, Ajay has always made a conscious effort not to get typecast. He started off as an action hero with ‘Phool Aur Kaante’, but is now regarded as a character actor. He is an actor who is just as convincing in brooding, macho roles as he is in comic capers. He is among the few stars who have challenged the notion that the plain-looking, not-so-fair actors cannot draw audi-

ences. He has the unique distinction of having bagged two ‘best actor’ National Awards. The low-key actor, who shuns publicity, is the first choice of veteran directors like Rajkumar Santoshi as well as Ram Gopal Varma. Son of famous stunt director, Veeru Devgan, he dabbled in direction and editing in a junior capacity before being lured before the camera for Kuku Kohli’s action flick ‘Phool Aur Kaante’, which was a box office hit. ‘Jigar’, ‘Vijaypath’ and ‘Divya Shakti’ were all action films, which had their own audiences.

Then came a lean period, when the fair-skinned aristocracy displaced Ajay. Observes



director Mahesh Bhatt: “His very place among the top stars was questioned because he was the son of a stunt director and was supposed to be good only in stunt roles. Ajay was patient and proved them wrong.”

‘Ishq’ came as a turning point. For the first time, he was accepted in a non-action hero role. Then came ‘Pyaar To Hona Hi Tha’, and the big hit, ‘Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam’, where his portrayal of the low-key, understanding husband, received critical acclaim.

His work in films like ‘Zakhm’, ‘Company’, ‘Gangaajal’, ‘The Legend of Bhagat Singh’ and ‘Omkaara’ leave no doubt that Ajay is indeed the “dark horse” of the industry.

Santoshi, who has done some of his best films with Ajay, is keen on making a film based on emperor Ashoka and then cast him in a mythological film based on the epic ‘Ramayana’. “I am sure people will be astounded by the way he interprets two compellingly fascinating characters. Ajay is one of the few leading men in the industry today who will some day become a valued character actor,” says Santoshi. “One of Ajay’s strengths is that he can get under the skin of any well-written role and make it his own. He has sharp, expressive eyes. He appears to be very natural in all the challenging characters he has played so far,” Santoshi adds. ■