A celebration of India's achievements and diversity

t began as a simple march-past to mark the emergence of India as a sovereign, secular, democratic republic on January 26, 1950. Today. the annual Republic Day celebrations have grown into an event that showcases India's military might and cultural diversity.

Republic Day means many things to India. It is the day on which the Constitution came into effect, paving the way for the country's first general election in 1952. It is the day on which India's first President, Rajendra Prasad, assumed office. It is also a National Holiday — one of only three to be declared such. The other two are Independence Day on August 15 and Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary on October 2.

Thus, from the pomp of the January 26 parade — including a colourful cultural pageant — to the mystical aura of the Beating Retreat ceremony that concludes the celebrations three days later on January 29, the event in its grand sweep salutes the Indian spirit while

The Republic Day parade as it rolls down the majestic Rajpath in New Delhi. The annual parade is held on January 26 every year.

reaffirming the country's pre-eminent place in the global arena.

To get a feel of what the parade is all about, one needs to first picture a three km-long grand boulevard called Rajpath that stretches from Rashtrapati Bhavan, the Presidential palace, to the war memorial at the imposing India Gate arch. From very early on the morning of January 26, people begin gathering on both sides of Rajpath and occupy either the stands in the general enclosures or comfortable armchairs in the blocks meant for dignitaries.

Even as the spectators fight the bitter chill, the air comes alive exactly at 9 a.m. with the haunting strains of 'Ai Mere Watan Ke Logon' sung by the Nightingale of India — the evergreen singer Lata Mangeshkar. The song goes like this: 'O people of my land/Fill your eyes with tears/Remember the sacrifice/Of the martyrs who laid down their lives for the country'. It was written by a poet named Pandit Pradeep in memory of the army and paramilitary personnel who were

BEATING THE RETREAT



police forces in their ceremonial uniforms, with waistbands and headgear

providing a splash of colour and medals glistening on their chests. Interspersed with the contingents are the bands drawn from different units of the armed forces, their music a skilful blend of Indian and Western marches. It is then the turn of the Indian Army, the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force to display their lethal firepower and latest acquisitions. Till about a decade ago, the bulk of this equipment was acquired from abroad. Now, a major portion of what is on view is of indigenous origin.

After the military aspect, the cultural element takes over with groups of schoolchildren and artistes enacting a pageant of music, dance and acrobatics. A series of tableaux roll down Rajpath displaying India's vibrant and eclectic culture and the progress achieved through the government's various development schemes. In most years, a flypast by the Indian Air Force provides fitting finale to the parade.

he Beating Retreat ceremony on January 29 concludes the Republic Day celebrations. It's held at Vijay Chowk, a huge square at the foot of the Raisina Hill atop which Rashtrapati Bhavan rests.

The early evening is usually cold and windy, with the setting sun an orange ball as bandsmen of the Indian armed forces mount an awesome musical and visual extravaganza that has few parallels in the world.

Such is the heady mix of music, sound and pageantry that it leaves spectators more than overwhelmed — a feeling of being transported to a wonderland where there are no tomorrows.

At the conclusion of the 60-minute gala, as the 1,000 bandsmen of the army, navy and air force march up the gradient of Raisina Hill, the strains of the rousing martial tune 'Sare Jahan Se Aacha' hang in the air; and thousands of light bulbs festooning Rashtrapati Bhavan and the imposing secretariat blocks that flank it come alight, lifting the spirits, sending the audience into raptures and truly confirming the title of the march — that India is a land without parallel.

killed in the 1962 border conflict with China. The story goes that India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was moved to tears when he first heard the lyrics.

As the music fades, the prime minister travels down Rajpath to pay homage to the eternal soldier at the India Gate memorial and then returns to the saluting base midway down the boulevard to receive the President, the Supreme Commander of the armed forces, who takes the salute at the parade.

Time was when the President arrived at the saluting base in a coach-and-six, escorted by his horse-mounted bodyguards resplendent in their red and black tunics with their lances glittering in the sunlight. The President's Bodyguards are still there but security considerations have dictated the buggy give way to a limousine. The president arrives, a 21gun salute booms out, the national anthem is played. And the parade begins. Down Rajpath come rows of marching contingents drawn from the army, navy, air force, paramilitary and