

Photos: Anindya Chattopadhyay, Sanjay Sekhri

A NEW INDIA ON SHOW: WOMEN LEAD FROM THE FRONT AT RAJPATH



(From left) Lieutenant Bhavana Kasturi leading the Indian Army Service Corps; Lt Commander Ambika Sudhakran at the head of Indian Navy contingent; Flying Officer Ragi Ramachandran leads the Indian Air Force squad; and Major Khushboo Kanwar of the all-women Assam Rifles unit

# Between arms and culture, the Mahatma

## 70th Republic Day Parade Reiterates India's Military Might, Diversity Of Life

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

**New Delhi:** The morning chill and threats of rain did not dampen the spirits of the 1.5 lakh people gathered at Rajpath to celebrate India's 70th Republic Day on Saturday. With this year being Mahatma Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary, facets from his life loomed large over the parade, but the nation — and chief guest Cyril Ramaphosa, president of South Africa — also saw once again India's military might and cultural diversity.

The parade, led by Lt-General Asit Mistry, GoC, Delhi area, began at 10.15am, cheered on by foreign dignitaries and the pantheon of Indian politicians, from former prime ministers to cabinet ministers and leaders such as Congress President Rahul Gandhi, Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and deputy CM Manish Sisodia.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi wearing yellow and orange sari

### Girl from Hyderabad leads all-male contingent

A Hyderabad girl made history on Saturday as she, for the first time since Independence, led an all-male contingent at the Republic Day parade in New Delhi. 26-year-old Lt Bhavana Kasturi of the Indian Army Service Corps led the contingent of 144 men with Army chief Bipin Rawat taking the salute.

"It was a great moment for me. I felt very happy," the lady officer told TOI after the parade. I was especially thrilled that my parents were present in the audience just to see me lead the contingent." Bhavana has said earlier that she has even been posted in places like Kargil and expects to get the same duties as her male counterparts. **TNN**

ved at Rajpath in usual fervour. He and defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman greeted the chief guest and President Ram Nath Kovind. Modi also walked up to and greeted former prime minister Manmohan Singh.

Tears flowed freely among the family members of lance naik Nazir Ahmed Wani as the Ashok Chakra, awarded posthumously, was collected by his wife and mother. There were moist eyes among the crowd too as the citation was read out to honour the former militant and later a soldier

from Kashmir who died fighting terrorists in his home state of Kashmir.

The parade began then, and as has become a new tradition, the Indian Army, Navy and the Air Force contingents were all led by women. Woman power was later accentuated in a show of daredevil stunts by a woman biker from the Corp of Signals.

Lines from Rabindranath Tagore's poems found mention in the parade commentary focused on empowerment of youth and women. With the strength of the armed forces on

show, it was perhaps the opportune moment to showcase the newly inducted M777 howitzers and the K9 Vajra self-propelled howitzers, all to raucous cheers from the crowd.

The colourful tableaux from 16 states showcased culture and life in India. The ones related to Gandhi, particular the one created by the railways ministry, were well appreciated. People were seen standing on their seats to cheer and clap as the railways tableau went past. It was dedicated to the journey from barrister Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi.

The parade culminated with the Indian Air Force flypast, comprising upgraded aircraft in the traditional vertical Charlie and trishul formations. After the event, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as usual, strode along Rajpath greeting the children and youngsters lined up along the barricades and waving out to the others.

Photos: Sanjay Sekhri, Anindya Chattopadhyay

### Rahul gets front row seat, next to Gadkari

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**New Delhi:** After last year's row over Rahul Gandhi's seating, the Congress president was accorded a front row placement at Saturday's Republic Day parade next to minister of road transport and highways Nitin Gadkari with whom he could be seen engaged in cordial discussion.

While Rahul was in the front row, leader of opposition in Rajya Sabha, Ghulam Nabi Azad, was in the second. Last year, both had been placed in the sixth row, sparking a controversy as Congress protested the seating arrangement which it said was a deliberate put down. Government had then said there was no protocol violation and that even the leader of opposition was usually placed several rows back.

However, there seems to have been a re-look at arrangements and Rahul was on the front row with Gadkari. In the past, an exception has been made for Congress leader Sonia Gandhi who has been given a seat in the front row. Congress leaders, however, said party presidents have always been seated in the front row at Rajpath.

The seemingly easy conversation between Rahul and Gadkari also attracted attention given the bitter exchanges usually traded by BJP and Congress. The seating arrangements are worked out by the defence ministry. BJP chief Amit Shah and home minister Rajnath Singh were also on the front row.

### Women march leaders to biofuel, an R-Day of firsts

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

**New Delhi:** From the all-women marching contingent of Assam Rifles to the use of biofuel in the aircraft participating in the flypast, the 70th Republic Day had a number of firsts.

One first that touched the hearts of the crowd was the sight of Indian National Army soldiers, the wizened veterans never having been seen on Rajpath earlier: Lieutenant Bhavana Kasturi broke traditions by becoming the first woman to lead a male army contingent, that of the Army Service Corps. This was followed by the all-women contingent of the Assam Rifles, the oldest paramilitary force in the country, led by Major Khushboo Kanwar: Kanwar is the daughter of a bus conductor from Rajasthan and was elated

after the parade. "It was a great honour," she gushed.

Taking part in the parade for the first time, four INA veterans, all over 90 years old, rode in open Army jeeps. The oldest among them, Bhagmal, is 100 years old. He joined the INA in 1942 and now lives Manesar, Haryana. The other three were Lalti Ram, 98, from Panchkula, Hira Singh, 97, from Narnaul in Haryana and Parmanand Yadav from Chandigarh. "We still believe in the motto of selflessness that Netaji Subhas imbibed in us. It was huge honour to be called to attend the Republic Day celebrations after so many years," said Lalti Ram, while being escorted back.

There was also the first-time use of indigenously developed biofuel by the Indian Air Force on Saturday. Its lead aircraft, AN-32 Sutej transporter, used fuel produced from the jatropa plant, developed and patented by the Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research-Indian Institute of Petroleum at Dehradun.

Every year children honoured with bravery awards rode on elephants at the parade. This year, the children in open roof Gypsy vehicles were not only bravehearts but also innovators, outstanding sports, cultural and social activists, all winners of newly named Pradhan Mantri Bal Puraskar.

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### Recognised finally, exult INA veterans

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**New Delhi:** Among the several firsts in Saturday's 70th Republic Day parade was the participation of four veterans of the Indian National Army who fought against the British forces under Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's leadership.

The four veterans — Parmanand Yadav (99), Lalti Ram (98), Hira Singh (97) and Bhagmal (95) — all from Haryana, got pride of place in the parade as they rode down the Rajpath in open jeeps, as a striking black and white portrait of Netaji hung from the side of their vehicles.

The INA was an army formed by Indian nationalist Rash Behari Bose in 1942 in Southeast Asia during WW-II. Later, Netaji took charge of the army to fight against the British forces. The government's attempt

to bring the INA veterans to limelight is significant keeping in view that the country had on October 21 last year commemorated at Red Fort the 75th anniversary of the proclamation of the Azad Hind government.

After the parade, a frail but enthusiastic Hira Singh, with the help of his grandson Sunderpal, told TOI, "I and my fellow soldiers fought against the British forces in Singapore, Thailand and Burma. We fought with machine guns and bombs. Later, we were kept in the Cellular Jail in Andaman and Nicobar islands which was surrounded by water. We were kept in the jail for over a year where we were tortured a lot."

Lalti Ram, another INA veteran, was happy that the government finally recognised their freedom struggle. The 98-year-old had presented a Netaji cap to PM Modi last year.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi walks down Rajpath, waving to the crowd having seen off the chief guest, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, and President Ram Nath Kovind



## Amid machines of war, innocence and joy of children carry the day

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

**New Delhi:** Among those whose performances attracted the loudest cheers at Rajpath on Saturday were the children participating in the Republic Day parade. From the dances and marches to winning accolades, children outdid all other participants of the parade.

The NCC girls' contingent has now been participating in the parade for 55 years and once again got a lot of applause. Senior Under Officer Garima Singh Bhargava led the contingent consisting of 159 senior wing cadets drawn from all 17 directorates of the NCC. These cadets have excelled in various adventure activities like mountaineering, rafting and para gliding. Quite like the girls, 159 boys too marched in their own contingent on Rajpath.

Apart from this, over 500 children from four schools — three from Delhi, one from Kol-

kata — brightened up the stage with their breathtaking dance performances, each of which sent out a unique message.

Three other schools from Delhi rendered songs on the theme of the event — Mahatma Gandhi — starting with Navy Children School in Chanakyapuri, from which 170 kids performed on 'Bapu Mahan'. The students had under-

gone rigorous practice for the final show and the hard work was evident in the human pyramids they formed in the middle of the dance routines.

Two schools from Delhi — Rajkiya Pratibha Vikas Vidyalaya in Kishan Ganj and Kendriya Vidyalaya of Paschim Vihar — also performed at the end of the parade. There were at least 100 children who

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## Drones, cameras and no-entry signs enable a tight venue for the parade

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

**New Delhi:** Rajpath turned into a fortress on Saturday as thousands of people and dignitaries remained under the surveillance of more than 10,000 armed security men from Delhi Police's Special Cell, Special Protection Group, National Security Guard and the Army. Cops kept a hawk eye on the parade route and emphasis was laid on the skies around the venue.

Entry to roads around central Delhi's Rajpath, Tilak Marg and Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg were blocked after 5am on Saturday. Vehicles without parking stickers were turned away even before they reached the Lutyens' zone. While multiple checks were carried out at barricades near the venue, inter-state buses were barred from entering Delhi from Friday night.

Security was also tightened in popular markets in south and central Delhi and in the Delhi Cantonment area.

Senior Delhi Police officers monitored the situation at Rajpath in a C4I command and control room using cameras installed at strategic locations around central Delhi. Cops also installed face-detection cameras at the venue that would capture the faces of the entrants and save them into a database. More than 30 such cameras were

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Indian Army's K9 Vajra-T marches on Rajpath

re installed around the Rajpath. The live-feed from IAF drones were analysed every minute, while a snipers and SWAT teams of the Special Cell were positioned strategically to cover the maximum areas.

Apart from Delhi Police personnel, commandos from the NSG and paramilitary forces dotted the parade route till the Red Fort. A six-layer ring around Red Fort, with an additional layer comprising confidential and detailed "sub-layers" at Rajpath, where VIPs and other dignitaries were seated, was in place.

As a part of frisking measures, people wearing jackets were asked to remove them during the security checks. The security of each flank of the Rajpath was monitored by a DCP-rank officer. A NOTAM (notice to airmen) was issued to the Indian Air Force personnel, during which no flights were allowed to land or take off from IGI airport from 10.30am to 12.15pm on Friday and Saturday.

**MASS SALUTE** When "The Last Stand" was playing its elegiac melody and PM Narendra Modi was placing a wreath at Amar Jawan Jyoti, an announcement was made over the PA system for all men in uniform to stand up for the homage. And then as the Army, Navy and Air Force officers stood up for a minute's silence, more than one lakh people silently got to their feet too and honoured India's fallen heroes.



### WHEN THE SKY BLOOMED

The unexpectedly good weather on Saturday — rain and fog had been forecast, but there was sunshine instead — allowed the crowd one pleasure they had missed in the past two parades: Mi-17 choppers raining flowers on the people

at Rajpath. Because of fog and inclement weather, the Indian Air Force flypast had been cancelled the previous two years. On Saturday, the pilots had ample visibility to undertake the flypast.

### CAMERAS, CAMELS AND CORDONS

The majesty — and can one dare say, the rhythmic poetry — of men in uniform astride caparisoned camels not only drew loud applause from the parade goers, but also got them itching to take photographs, and if possible a selfie with the smart markers in the background. As some people tried to go past the security cordons to take a picture of the colourful camel contingent of Border Security Force, extra ropes had to be put up to keep overenthusiastic crowd from getting a closer shot.



### IN SELF-DEFENCE

National Security Guard troopers deployed for security duties outside the enclosures became props for selfies as youngsters stood alongside stern-faced commandos, their mobile phones clicking away. Later, however, the special forces personnel refused to allow anyone near and positioned barricades to stop the youngsters from approaching them.

### ROCK THE WALK

After seeing off President Ram Nath Kovind at the end of the parade, PM Modi took his characteristic walk on Rajpath to greet the people, who began waving wildly on seeing him. Some of the PM's ardent fans tried to jump the barricades to click selfies with the yellow turbaned leader, and the security personnel had to form a human chain to keep his supporters at bay.