

February 1, 2015

## March of memories: red earth and pouring rain



• The first all-women contingent at the parade. Photo: R.V. Moorthy



• Reuters

Security personnel keep watch.



U.S. President Barack Obama, President Pranab Mukherjee and Prime Minister Narendra Modi leave after the parade. Photo: S. Subramaniam

## **It's been a week since India's grandest parade but images still linger**

The light drizzle sets off a drum roll on the roof. I sip the woodsmoke-infused tea and dress for what is arguably India's grandest spectacle — the Republic Day Parade in New Delhi. Only this year, it's grander because of who the chief guest is. The U.S. President's presence means that I had to fax a copy of my passport to gain access to a copper-plate scripted invitation from the Ministry of Defence, travel nearly 2,000 km from home, leave my mobile phone behind and tog out in a smart coat and carefully coiffured hair. I make one concession to sanity though — I drop the heels and pull on a pair of sneakers having been warned that I may have to walk a bit, despite the VIP pass I am brandishing.

S.P. Marg is closed because that's where POTUS is staying and the bleary-eyed policemen wave us down Shanti Path. We race past flower-decked banners and embassies in the Gypsy, past groups of people who have walked since dawn to get to the stands. No food or drink is allowed inside our enclosure. So I tell my trying-to-be-enthusiastic-for-my-sake nine-year-old and sleepy six-year-old to hurry through the sandwiches as we are almost at Mansingh Road where we have to alight. As warrants such occasions, the husband is annoyingly dignified. I seem to be the only one terribly excited. Republic Day has meant so much to me since 1994 when I first came to Rajpath as an NCC cadet. And though I have viewed the parade as a spectator twice since then, the aura around the event this time makes it special. The gates are thrown open at 7.30 a.m. and I'm sure we'll get plum seats because how many people will venture out on a rainy winter morning when you can watch it all on DD? But at Mansingh Road, there is a multitude trying to squeeze through two scanners. "No umbrella," says the policewoman who pats me down. I prepare to arrive looking like a drowned rat...

Red earth and pouring rain... a surge carries us to our enclosure, but not before another two rounds of frisking. I wipe down our seats with newspaper and am happy with the view — both of Rajpath and the Presidential dais. India Gate, to my right, is shrouded in a pall of grey.

Everything on Raisina Hill is swallowed by mist. The spats on the ceremonial guard, a few feet away, are barely visible and the fan-shaped *turrah* on his turban hangs limply. It's a quarter past eight, with an hour and 45 minutes to go. In that time, seats are fought over, won and lost, and friends made with the Joshis from Mumbai who've journeyed to see both parade and POTUS. When the leaden skies part to reveal helicopters showering drifts of marigold petals and the Last Post is sounded, everyone comes alive. The only people not watching are the policemen and the U.S Secret Service who unblinkingly stare at the crowds.

And then, the magnificent Beast arrives. Barack Obama steps out of his limousine and waves to the cheering crowds. He ascends the dais, followed minutes later by our President. As the 21-gun salute booms, everyone on the dais disappears behind the rain-pocked glass shield. The troopers of the President's Bodyguard ride off. Stoic widows receive bravery awards on behalf of their husbands, their pride more evident than their pain. The parade begins...

I notice the absence of the jeeps ferrying the Victoria Cross awardees (the last Indian VC died in 2005). I notice fellow alumnus — Good Shepherd-girl and Stella Marian — Capt. Divya Ajithkumar lead the first all-women contingent at this parade and remember the long gruelling hours that earn you the privilege to march down Rajpath. Military bands in plaid, contingents of men drawn from the Forces, their regimental histories mirrored in their uniforms, moustachioed men on colourful camels and cultural floats...

By the time the death-defying bikers of the BSF arrive, the drizzle turns into a light rain and, in a show of Indian ingenuity, bucket seats are dislodged to cover heads. Children surge towards the sodden dhurries in front to get a better view and stand on chairs to see the fly past. The acrid smell of jet fuel fills the air. The Sukhoi-30 doing the Vertical Charlie disappears into the clouds, its fading scream signalling the end of the parade. Tricolour balloons float up. Obama stops briefly by our enclosure. People surge forward but not too close. A charming wave, a smile and he leaves. I jump off the chair and shake hands with the Joshis. For a brief moment, we are united in the joy of celebrating the Republic.