

Tuesday, Sep 14, 2021

National / White Elephant March

White Elephant March



Tribhuvan Tiwari

Republic Day was always long on ceremony, now it's short on grace too



M.S. Gill

25 February 2008

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I saw the Republic Day parade for the first time in 1958 as a young ias trainee on duty. It went on for far too long, with every arm of the army, navy and air force insisting on due representation. After 50 years of the same experience, many of us have raised questions: should it be held every year, since for months it disrupts life in the capital, at great economic loss? Should it be so long? The parade length has been cut down over the years, but I still see no reason to march rockets through narrow roads across the city or parade cardboard ships with little toy helicopters swinging on poles. This display of national virility is unnecessary. Yes, the colourful regiments of the Indian army should march, so should select contingents of the navy and air force and the bsf camel corps which people tend to find the most appealing. The tribal dancers from central and eastern India bring life and joy to the gathering. They also bring a sad thought: how long will their culture survive the new economic order rapidly spreading across the country?

I remember the president's tea party in 1958. The number of guests was reasonable in relation to the size of the lawn and made for a comfortable, civilised afternoon. The president and Jawaharlal Nehru walked around the lawns, having a word or two with the guests. We could gawk at Nehru at close quarters. But over the last five years or so, the number of invitees has increased so much that there is only cramped standing room. Because of the vast number of invitees, the super vips are kept behind a rope cordon manned by policemen. The other guests, who include distinguished Indians and diplomats, have to file past in a queue to have their darshan.

A social occasion should have more grace. I remember that whenever S.S. Ray gave a dinner as the Punjab governor, he stood at the door to receive all his guests. So did Morarji Desai as prime minister. My suggestion is that if large numbers have to be invited, then there should be two or even three garden parties on the eve of Republic Day.

Ever since terrorism arrived on the scene, the president comes to this ceremonial occasion in a Mercedes and not in an open horse-drawn state carriage as before. The slow canter of the president's bodyguard horses escorting the car makes it difficult

for the car engine not to seize. This practice needs to be reviewed. The British did not give up their style or ceremony after the bombing of the hotel where Margaret Thatcher was holding her party conference. The queen continued to ride on her horse at her annual parade. Security was taken care of in more subtle ways. Is it really beyond us as a proud republic to manage effective security for the half kilometre from the president's residence to the saluting base? Sometimes, I feel the security paraphernalia dominates civil democratic thinking far too much.

The winter months revive us after the long harsh summer. The grass revives, flowers are planted and people can bring their families out for a breath of fresh air to the glorious India Gate lawns that Lutyens has given us. Unfortunately, the parade eats into all this pleasure. Over November and December, thekedars dump metal benches, tin sheets and other junk on these lawns. Large brick structures are built at the saluting base. A month of practice and rehearsals disrupts the city. After the parade, the rest of the winter is gone in the leisurely removal of this junk. Can't the defence ministry and the Indian army remove it all in three-four days after the parade? And can't the gardeners be summoned back to immediately restore the lawns?

This is a parade to honour our soldiers who regularly risk and even sacrifice their lives for the nation. Currently, India has two soldier-icons: Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw and Marshal of the Indian Air Force, Arjan Singh. Arjan distinguished himself in the 1965 war and Sam in 1971. Sam is far too sick now to swagger over to the parade as he proudly used to. Arjan, though frail now, still makes it his duty to be present in full uniform and sword. He came to this year's parade with his wife. A little birdie whispered to me that he was seated in the second row, somewhere behind lesser men. Somebody had the good sense to point this out and request him to take a front seat. He was gracious enough to agree. I am shocked. Surely on this day, when we honour all soldiers, he should be seated in a manner appropriate to his status. In fact, the president should consider inviting him to sit in the president's box.

(Gill is the former chief election commissioner and currently a Rajya Sabha MP.)



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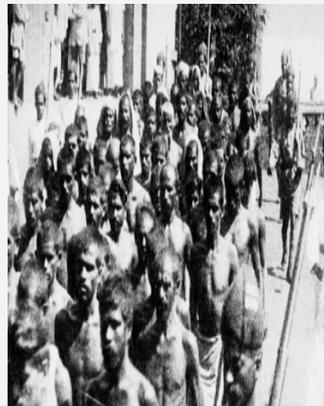
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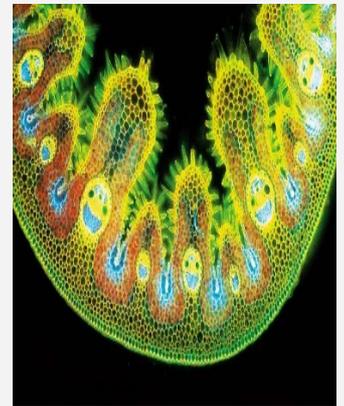
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