

Delhi rises early to mark India's 70

Amid Tight Cover, City Shows Patriotism Never Grows Old

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Even before the sun was up, thousands had queued up at the portals of the imposing Red Fort, which, true to its name, had become the capital's most secure area. As early as 4am, schoolchildren, clad in national colours, lined up to be admitted past the stone walls of the Mughal era structure in preparation for the Prime Minister's traditional speech on Independence Day.

Inside, those dressed in blue sat in such a way as to spell out Bharat. The others—including the children dressed as Krishna in bright yellow,

When the PM unfurled the flag, strong winds carried rose petals to the ecstatic crowds below. And when the gun salute began, it scared off birds around the Red Fort. The fluttering of wings, mixed with the boom of 21 guns, created quite a buzz

low, the trademark peacock feather tucked into their gilt crowns, to mark Janmashtami—created a saffron-white-green illumination around the word. The students waited excitedly though patiently as dog squads patrolled the complex and the VIP guests and diplomats shuffled their way to their seats by 6.30am.

Amid the sound of patriotic songs, the giant display screens showed moments from the country's history. Unlike previous years, there were no rain clouds in the sky. There was a commotion outside when over-eager crowds tried to rush in and had to be controlled by the security people.

At 6.45am, contingents from the Army, Navy, Air Force and Delhi Police marched smartly and took their position below the flower bedecked VIP enclosure and the crowd turned restive in anticipation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's arrival. Finally, at 7.20am, a loud cheer went up as the PM's convoy wended its way to Lahori Gate, where Modi, dressed in a yellow kurta and a fiery red and saffron turban, one of its ends falling down to his shoes, was received by defence minister Arun Jaitley.

When the PM unfurled the national flag, the strong winds carried the rose petals to the ecstatic crowds below. Then there was the noise of hundreds of wings as the 21 guns boomed in salute to the singing of the national anthem and frightened pigeons swirled in panic among the fort's line of white domes. Some order was restored as the tune changed to 'Sare jahan se accha' and the guard of honour marched away.

At 7.34am, Modi began the shortest of his four speeches yet from the red sandstone ramparts. Happily, in a move designed to promote the concept of accessibility, a dedicated enclosure had been created for specially abled children, where special instructors narrated the developments as well as translated the PM's speech through sign language.

The many who heard the PM through his 56-minute speech marvelled at the lack of fussy security around him at the rostrum. As is usual for Modi, he had no teleprompters in front of him, no bulletproof glass protecting him and no large-font sheets at which he needed to take glances. It was an extempore speech, and for its format, took up current topics, such as the Gorakhpur hospital tragedy and the violence in Kashmir.

Identified flying objects

The air space above and around the red sandstone fortress might have been secured for drone attacks. But no one had perhaps accounted for stray kites. Indeed a couple dropped into the no-fly zone even as the PM continued delivering his speech. Security officers, not unduly worried but still discomfited by the intrusion, stepped in quickly to remove the flying objects.

In style, from head to toe

The PM's August 15 headgear has started to attract as much interest as celebrity gowns at red-carpet events. Modi's bright pink pagdi last year had left many bemused. His choice this year proved as worthy of animated discussion. He had on a flaming red-and-saffron turban, one end of which extended down almost to his shoes. For his four Independence Day speeches at Red Fort, Modi has made it a point to sport a distinct style on his head.

True to his word, more or less

There was less fidgeting among the crowd this year as Modi restricted himself to a speech lasting 56 minutes. The PM had earlier confessed in one of his Mann ki Baat talks to having received complaints about his record establishing speeches on Independence day, like the 94-minute oratory from the rampart last year, the longest ever delivered by an Indian PM.

Diversion in the clouds

It may have been an attempt to thwart any attack from the air, the Intelligence Bureau having cautioned about such a threat, but the helicopters regularly passing above the sky at Red Fort was a delight for the schoolchildren. Every time, they flew overhead, there were loud cheers and fingers raised in excitement.



Photos: Yogesh Kumar



A twist of the tail

The spectators were crammed into their designated enclosure at the tightly secured Red Fort. Squirrels, however, had the run of the grounds. One little creature even dared to venture towards the smartly attired row of soldiers making up the guard of honour for the PM and, to the delight of the crowd, darted here and there among their black, shining boots.

As free spirited as Krishna

Like he did last year, PM Modi entered the children's enclosure at Red Fort to interact with schoolchildren. Many of them bowed down and touched his feet, while others were ecstatic at simply getting to shake his hands. On Tuesday, in addition to the usual kids in national colours, there were many in bright yellow kurtas with peacock adorned crowns on their heads. With Independence Day and Janmashtmi coinciding, these little Krishnas added to the festive air. "He appreciated my Krishna attire and said I was a good girl," gushed Aina, a Class VII student of SSK Khalsa School, after shaking hands with the PM.

So near yet so far

The students may have got the chance of their lifetime to meet Modi, shake his hands and take selfies. Many others, however, rued their luck. Naveen Kumar, smartly attired in his National Cadet Corps uniform, sighed, "We could not even get close to the PM as Modiji did not approach the NCC. I loved coming to the Red Fort, but regret not being able to meet him."

Can and able

A separate enclosure for specially abled kids was set up by the union ministry of social justice and empowerment, a first at an Independence Day event at Red Fort. Located in front of the VIP enclosure on the ramparts, it sat children, who cheered enthusiastically as the progress of the function was described and the PM's speech translated for them by sign-language experts.

No creeping, no crawling

It was not simply terrorists and troublemakers that the organisers were keen to keep away from the venue. Delhi Police roped in Wildlife SOS, a nature-care organisation, to keep snakes and monitor lizards from being too enthusiastic about celebrating Independence Day. A recent reconnaissance had shown Red Fort to be home to reptiles, explaining why Wildlife SOS conducted a check on Monday and deployed experts on Tuesday.