

Soldiers to the world

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Indian Express, 14 July 2009

As a small contingent of the Indian troops marches down the Champs Elysees in Paris today, India owes a special debt of gratitude to France. By inviting the Indian armed forces to join this year's Bastille Day parade, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has turned the spotlight on the Indian army's long-forgotten internationalist legacy.

As part of building a new strategic partnership with India since the mid-'90s, France has helped New Delhi renegotiate its position in the global nuclear order. Paris gave New Delhi the diplomatic cover when it defied the world with its nuclear tests in May 1998, promoted the idea of changing the global non-proliferation rules to facilitate civilian nuclear cooperation with India, and worked with Washington to get the international community to endorse India's nuclear exceptionalism. France is also emerging as an important partner in India's defence industrialisation and military modernisation.

In comparison with these many recent milestones in the bilateral relationship, Sarkozy's invitation to Indian troops might seem a symbolic gesture at best. In recalling the contributions of the

Indian army to the political evolution of Europe in the first half of the 20th century, Sarkozy is in fact pointing to the potential of the Indian armed forces in shaping the world's security politics in the 21st century.

Strategic analysts around the world will have little difficulty in recognising that a rising India will necessarily undertake greater military burdens in the maintenance of global order. New Delhi's ability to do so, however, is clouded by the nation's loss of memory on the pre-Independence history of the Indian army.

In just one victorious battle in France at Neuve Chapelle during March 10-12, 1915, an Indian and British corps suffered losses of 12,800 men. Besides France, where its troops saw action through 1914-15, the Indian army operated in such other theatres like Africa and the Middle East during World War I.

During the Great War, nearly 1.2 million Indians were recruited for service in the army; when it ended, about 950,000 Indian troops were serving overseas. According to the official count, between 62,000 and 65,000

Indian soldiers were killed or died from wounds in that war.

Although the India Gate stands at the very heart of Delhi as a memorial to Indian soldiers who fell in World War I and the earlier Afghan wars, remembrance of the army's expeditionary past has remained a political taboo since Independence. Once the "Amar Jawan Jyoti" was installed under the India Gate after the 1971 war, the memories of the Indian army's participation in the two World Wars began to erode.

If World War I has been abstracted out of the India Gate, there is no monument in the capital at all for the Indian soldiers who fell in the World War II. The Indian army saw action on fronts ranging from Italy and North Africa to East Africa, the Middle East and the Far East.

In Southeast Asia alone, 700,000 Indian troops joined the effort to oust the Japanese

armies from Burma, Malaya and Indo-China. By the time the war ended, the Indian army stood at a massive 2.5 million men, the largest all volunteer force the world had seen until then.

Why is political India so reluctant to remember the massive Indian contribution to the two World Wars? The answer lies in the uncomfortable fact that the national movement was deeply divided in its attitudes towards the Indian army under British colonial rule.

These divisions became sharper as the movement confronted the meaning of and political choices offered by World War II. While the Indian National Congress, as the principal vehicle of the national movement, condemned the "imperialist war", individual leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Chakravarti Rajagopolachari fully backed the Allied war effort against the fascists. The emergence of the Indian National Army, led by Subhash Chandra Bose, brought into further relief India's ambiguous response to the war.

It was no surprise that the divided national movement could not leverage the Indian army's extraordinary contribution to Allied victory in the negotiations with the British on the terms of independence, the distribution of the spoils of the war, and the construction of the post-war international order.

As the Indian leadership confronted many security challenges immediately after Independence, it perhaps made sense to forget for the moment the complex history of the Indian army before Independence. But more than 60 years after Independence, there is no justification for our current collective political amnesia about the army's rich past.

Rediscovering the army's heritag is indeed critical for a purposeful definition of our military future. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, undivided India was a net security provider not just in the Indian Ocean but beyond in Europe and the Far East.

As the negative consequences of Partition and the conflict with China played out, India's military energies turned inward and riveted on territorial defence. The occasional peace-keeping forces under the United Nations command were a pale reminder of India's potential to contribute to international security.

Although territorial defence would continue to be important, a rising India will inevitably be asked to return to its historic role as a security provider. As he watches the military parade in Paris today, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh might want to reflect two inter-related imperatives for India's military policy.

One is to reclaim the internationalist record of our army and mark its consequential contributions to both Indian and world history. And the other is to impart modern expeditionary capabilities to our armed forces. A rising

India that is conscious of its own military past will be better equipped to discharge its emerging responsibilities as a great power.

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