

Republic Day Camp 2021

The Rajpath Experience

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The Republic Day Parade, one of, if not the most iconic and colourful shows of Military Might and National Pride. As a young boy, every morning on the 26th of January, I was glued to the television at the break of day along with my family. While my parents had to leave for work, I remained watching Doordarshan, a channel, which I scoured for, on this day alone. Watching the parade on the Rajpath was a tradition for me. The name of “King’s Way”, as it was known, had been justified on this day, as the Men and Women of the Armed Forces of our Nation, marched down with pride, evident on their faces, and in every step. The colorful contingents marching in the foreground of the Indian Tricolour to the rhythm and beat of the Martial Bands were enough to give me a rush of adrenaline and goosebumps from excitement. Amongst all these marching contingents, towards the end, was unmistakably, the only contingent representing the Army, Navy and Air Force all at once. This, was the Rajpath Contingent of the National Cadet Corps. Unbeknownst to me at the time, was that one day, I would be an NCC Cadet, who would proudly bear the Rajpath Badge on my uniform.

On the very day I enrolled myself in the National Cadet Corps’s Naval Wing, I was adamant on one thing, that must earn my way to the

Republic Day Camp and march on the Rajpath during the Republic Day Parade. Fast forward to a year and half later, I had made it to the base camp, RDC 2021, as Kerala and Lakshadweep Directorate's Best Cadet, in the Senior Division Navy category. Although I was asked to give priority and importance to my Best Cadet events, I couldn't squander this opportunity, especially after sitting years on end in front of the television on the 26th of January, dreaming that one day, even I would earn the privilege, to be amongst those, whose Drill Boots have dug deep into the tarmac of the Rajpath.



Kerala and Lakshadweep Directorate SD Cadets, ready for Rajpath selection

The day of selection had finally arrived, the 5th of January. The air was cold and the environment tense. The seemingly endless Kadamtaal's that the Drill Instructors commanded, got the Cadets charged up and ready to go, despite a hint of fatigue from the unfamiliar temperatures for many. All the cadets were arranged on the basis of their height and sorted into groups of three irrespective of the Wing they belonged to. A Drill Instructor gave us Cadets a demo of what our selection procedure would entail. As simple as it sounds, cadets would march and by the word of command, do a Dahine Dekh followed by a Samne Dekh and the three Cadets would come to a halt in front of three Officers. The

test would finish within the blink of an eye and it would be decided whether one was selected, or if they would have to undergo the test once again, until they got the number that was required. The selection procedure was cut-throat and straightforward. The second you came to a halt, you were either pointed towards those who were selected, or shown the way back to those who still awaited their test. Cadets were being selected, but even more being sent back. Finally, my turn had arrived. As much as I wanted to be selected in my first go, I mentally prepared myself to go another 10 times. At the Drill Instructor's command, two cadets, one from Karnataka and the other from Tamil Nadu, along with myself marched down. With keen eyes from all those who awaited selection, the three of us went. I tried to emulate the josh and spirit that was required of every Rajpath Cadet in every step I took and before I knew it, I was standing in front of the Officers in Charge. He pointed at me and then to the contingent of selected cadets. Yet I stood still, since I needed a second to comprehend that I was indeed selected and while maintaining Cadet-like demeanour on my face, and desperately containing the excitement of the young boy in me, I ran to those who were selected, and reported to the Drill Instructor who was there, a Havildar from the Gurkha Regiment, who was short in stature, but definitely the most intimidating, with his raspy voice (Which was without a doubt, from screaming at the Gentlemen Cadets) and his Red Sash which bore the crest of the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun. He noticed the hint of excitement and pride from the faces of the selected cadets and said, क्या! आपको लगता है कि आपका काम हो गया? यह तो बस शुरुआत है!" (Do you think you're done? This is just the beginning..). Harmless words by its own, but whose meaning everybody would soon come to understand.

A total of 125 Senior Division Cadets were selected but it was now an uphill journey. Of these 125, only 100 would march on the 26th of January for the Republic Day Parade. There was no guarantee that you would be one among them. The following day, the 125 of us reported. We fell in on the basis of the Wing we belonged to and were further arranged by height and then began, what I would describe as few of the longest hours of my life. This was the first time we did Kadamtaals with no specified number. The sound of DMS boots hitting the ground were thunderous at first but died down to a feeble rumble without any delay. The Drill Instructors laughed at us “Rajpath” Cadets who were panting and seemingly ready to call it a day. This was followed by all of us practicing our hand swing to the point you wouldn’t feel your arm anymore and your rifle becomes a part of you. The very first day set the agenda, that would define those that follow.



Practice at Cariappa Parade Ground

Day in and day out we practiced and before we knew it they divided us into different grades. The best of the best were in the main contingent. However there was no guarantee until the 26th of January that you would remain in the main contingent and cadets were shuffling between different grades everyday. Soon we started practicing on the

Cariappa Parade Ground. Here we saw, for the first time, the other contingents who would march with us on the Rajpath, practicing for the Army Day Parade, our drill, clearly no match for theirs. The Commanding Officer of Rajpath told us, "These brave Jawans are the ones that you will be marching with. Ensure that you are worthy of it."

I still remember the first day we visited Rajpath for practice. Waking up well before the rest of the camp at 0230 hrs and wearing our complete set of ceremonials. The freezing cold was unforgiving to all irrespective of where they were from. Fatigue and Sleepiness from the night before loomed upon everyone. Clearing security and walking by many massive buildings towards the Rashtrapati Bhavan still lies crystal clear in my mind. INS India, DRDO Bhavan, The Nehru Planetarium so on and so forth, until we were in the shadow of the Rashtrapati Bhavan, illuminated peacefully by different lights, while the entire nation lay asleep. The only sound that could be heard were the stamping of boots, the echoes of the Martial bands, the roars of the contingents warming and the adrenaline rising within every single one who stood there. As we set off for the first time I remember seeing a road which stretched beyond the horizon, engulfed in the darkness and mist. We practiced here for hours on end that within the next few days, those of us in the main contingent, could do it with our eyes closed.



All smiles every morning before practice

The 26th of January arrived before we knew it. Everybody knew that this was the last time that most of us would ever march here, but being so used to it after practicing almost everyday, we were in denial. As we followed the NSG Contingent, we could feel the difference in the air. During our practice sessions, we were being cheered on by different contingents, but today we were all the same, being cheered on by the citizens of our country. On this day, all of us dug deeper, swung higher and held our chins up high. Saluting the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, The President of India at the *Salami Manch* will forever be engrained in my memory, and the feeling, unexplainable. As we marched on to the Major Dhyhan Chand Memorial Stadium where the parade would conclude, none of us wanted to stop. We all hoped that all of us could keep going, even if it was just one step. The Drill Instructors, who once screamed and berated us, now looked upon us like proud parents. Many of us cried with no emotion, hugging whomever was next to us, for at this point, we were all nothing short of family. As we made our way back to the DGNCC Camp, all that was on

everyone's minds were the past 22 days where they toiled relentlessly all in the hopes of this single day. At the DGNCC Camp, we were received like celebrities as we were now forever a part, of history.

The Rajpath Contingent is without a doubt, an embodiment of what our country should aspire to be. Nothing mattered, but your will to succeed and push yourself. It didn't matter where you were from, what religion you followed, what caste you belonged to, what you studied or how you were raised. And it was those of us, who were equals amongst equals by virtue of our effort and skill, that were chosen to march shoulder by shoulder to a better tomorrow, despite the difficulties our country is going through. Perhaps this is what, the Rajpath is a symbol of, that together, we can overcome any hurdle, no matter who we are or where we're from, provided, we are together.



Kerala and Lakshadweep Directorate, with their Rajpath Cadets