

OUR FITTING TRIBUTE

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The writer is the Vice-President of India.

I was overwhelmed with emotion after visiting the National War Memorial this week. It was a solemn moment of prayer, a moment of pride and a moment of optimism. I paid homage to the fallen soldiers who made the supreme sacrifice for a noble cause. I was proud that we had such brave men in our midst. I was optimistic that the memorial will inspire many others to take the valorous path shown by these brave sons of our country and that our country is in safe hands.

I am happy that finally, over 70 years after Independence, we have a National War Memorial dedicated to the thousands of defence personnel who laid down their lives to defend India's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Thanks to the initiative of Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#), this memorial is built in memory of our soldiers who lost their lives in the India-China War of 1962 and the soldiers who died during the wars thrust on us by Pakistan in 1947, 1965, 1971 and the Kargil War of 1999. It also commemorates the sacrifices made by our soldiers sent on peace-keeping missions of the United Nations, Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Relief (HADR) and counter-insurgency operations. Indian soldiers have shown extraordinary dedication and courage in different wars within India and abroad.

India accounted for 27 per cent of the global economic output in the 17th century. Despite this economic prowess, India never attacked any country because we are peace-loving and believe in Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.

Even under British colonial rule, Indian soldiers played a significant role in global theatres, participating in World War I and II. This was supported by all the parties at that time because they felt that our peoples' sacrifice in the battlefield would hasten the process of India's freedom as promised by the British. However, the British had, by and large, ignored Indian requests later.

India contributed immensely to the First World War effort in terms of both men and material. Her soldiers served with credit and honour in numerous battlefields around the globe — in France and Belgium, in Aden, Arabia, East Africa, Gallipoli, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Persia and Salonika. About 8,00,000 Indian troops fought in all the theatres of the war. In all, 47,746 were classed as killed or missing and 65,000 were wounded.

In November 2018, I was privileged to unveil the Indian Armed Forces Memorial at the town of Villers-Guislain in France, the first-of-its-kind built by India in France after the country's Independence. I felt at that moment that we should have had a war memorial in our country long ago. That moment came nearly 60 years after the idea was first mooted in the 1960s. We ought to have acted much earlier but I am pleased that, at least now, we have a befitting memorial because there are innumerable unsung heroes who demonstrated their valour in several battles in defence of our motherland.

Even as the world community has been yearning for peaceful coexistence and conventional wars are on the decline, terrorism has become an instrument of state policy for some misguided

nations over the last three decades. India has been at the receiving end of such terrorism sponsored from across the border. The Mumbai terrorist attack (26/11), heinous attack on our Parliament, regular acts of terror in Jammu and Kashmir, shook the pride and confidence of our nation. Hundreds of our brave soldiers and para-military forces gave up their lives in warding off such mindless attacks.

Our grateful nation resonates with the emotive slogan of “Jai Jawan-Jai Kisan”.

The National War Memorial is a fitting tribute to all those in uniform who have made the supreme sacrifice. It also has immense aesthetic value in that it creates a serene environment which encourages a visitor to reflect on the exalted patriotism and sacrifices of our soldiers. I am pleased that the National War Memorial, spread over 40 acres, has a uniquely Indian design. It comprises of four concentric circles resembling the Chakravyuha — a formation immortalised by the Mahabharata. These circles are named Amar Chakra, Veerta Chakra, Tyag Chakra and Rakshak Chakra. The names of all our soldiers who died in defence of India and on other assignments is etched in stone in these concentric circles. The memorial also has an Obelisk at its centre, with an eternal flame which symbolises the fact that the supreme sacrifices of our soldiers will be remembered eternally. It also contains statues of all the Param Vir Chakra awardees.

As PM Modi had suggested, our countrymen should treat a visit to this site as something akin to a pilgrimage to a holy site. That’s how we need to revere and respect our fallen heroes. I do hope all citizens will be visiting this sacred memorial in the months to come.

We should not only remember the supreme sacrifice made by thousands of soldiers to ensure that the country’s unity and integrity, but we should also not act in any manner which affects the morale of the armed forces. We should put our country first, nothing else.

Our response to the Pulwama attack was a pre-emptive strike to check unbridled proliferation of terror apparatus. This has drawn the world’s attention to the mounting tide of terror and India’s plea for concerted action at the global level by concluding the United Nations Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. This is, indeed, an opportune moment for an effective global response to this global challenge. It is heartening to note that there has been such widespread global support for Indian perspective and recent actions. One “Abhinandan” effectively articulated the mood of our nation by shooting down a fighter aircraft of the sponsor of terrorism in a daring act of valour and commitment.

This war memorial is an eternal reminder that our soldiers are the unsung heroes of our democracy. They are the silent, conscientious sentinels of peace.

The world over, many countries remember the fallen heroes on specially-designated days. For example, the Memorial Day in the US, Remembrance Day in countries like Australia, New Zealand and Armistice Day in France are solemn occasions when people pay their respects to the war veterans and fallen heroes. Similarly, Italy has a number of remembrance and memorial ceremonies dedicated to both soldiers and civilians who have been affected by war. Since 2000, Giorno Della Memoria (International Holocaust Remembrance Day) has been held on January 27. Yom Hasho’a, Israel’s Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and Heroism, is held on the 27th day of Nissan in the Hebrew calendar, towards the end of April or beginning of May. In Germany, Volkstrauertag (“national day of mourning”) is held two Sundays before the first day of Advent.

As opined by Squadron Leader Rana Chhina, the main suggestion is to institutionalise the grass roots culture of remembrance by highlighting the valour of armed forces and a special day of

remembrance to be observed regularly. This is a very valuable suggestion. I hope the political leadership will take a call on this.

Let us pay sincere homage to the fallen heroes, if possible, by dedicating a commemoration day to show that we care for their families and the war veterans who are still alive. After all, they have given their days and years fighting for us.

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