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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# Republic Day at 76 — Rethinking the Ceremony in an Age of Democratic Anxiety

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GS2

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MAINS RELEVANCE:

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## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*“Republic Day is increasingly a diplomatic event rather than a constitutional one. What does this signify about India's evolving national identity and its place in the global order? Should India use Republic Day as a platform for bilateral signalling?”*

## WHY IN NEWS

India's 77th Republic Day (January 26, 2026) was unprecedented in diplomatic terms — both EU leaders attended as collective chief guests for the first time, DRDO unveiled its hypersonic missile, and the Ashoka Chakra was awarded to an astronaut. As India marks 76 years as a functioning democracy, this editorial reflects on what Republic Day means constitutionally, diplomatically, and symbolically.

## THE DUAL CHARACTER OF REPUBLIC DAY

Republic Day began on January 26, 1950 as a solemn constitutional commemoration — the day India's Constitution came into force, replacing the Government of India Act 1935 as the supreme law of the land. The choice of January 26 itself was deliberate: it was the date on which the Indian National Congress, in 1930, had observed “Purna Swaraj Diwas” — the day the Congress formally declared complete independence as its goal (following the Lahore Session of December 1929).

Over seven decades, Republic Day has evolved into two overlapping events:

**The constitutional commemoration** — honouring the Republic, the Constitution, the martyrs, the armed forces, and civilian gallantry

**The diplomatic stage** — India's annual opportunity to signal strategic relationships, honour allies, and project its global ambitions through the choice of chief guests

The 2026 edition was distinctive precisely because the diplomatic purpose was unusually transparent.

## THE EU AS CHIEF GUEST — SYMBOLISM AND SUBSTANCE

Inviting the EU — not as individual heads of state but as a collective institution — was a statement about how India views the changing global order. India recognised the EU as a **geopolitical actor**, not merely a trade bloc. The EU, long dismissed as an economic giant but political dwarf (Henry Kissinger’s famous “What number do I call if I want to call Europe?”), has been asserting its strategic autonomy since the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war.

The visit coincided with the conclusion of the **India-EU Free Trade Agreement** and the signing of the **India-EU Security and Defence Partnership** (January 27) — making the Republic Day invitation less a courtesy and more a consecration of a new phase in bilateral relations.

**What this says about India’s foreign policy:** India’s “multi-alignment” doctrine means building deep relationships with all major poles — USA (Quad, iCET), Russia (S-400, oil imports), China (trade despite tensions), UAE/Gulf (remittances, energy), and now EU (trade, technology, climate finance). The EU partnership adds a critical Western pillar without the sovereignty constraints of a formal US alliance.

## REPUBLIC DAY AS CONSTITUTIONAL THEATRE

Beyond diplomacy, Republic Day performs an important constitutional function that risks being overshadowed by the spectacle. Three elements deserve reflection:

### The Padma Awards — Civilian Honours in a Democracy

The Padma Awards, announced annually on Republic Day eve, are India’s highest civilian honours. In a democracy, the significance of State-recognised civilian achievement extends beyond the individual recipient:

**They define national values:** The categories honoured (arts, literature, science, public affairs, social work) signal what the State considers excellence

**They correct historical invisibility:** The push to honour unsung heroes from Tier-2/3 towns, tribal communities, and marginalised arts (folk, classical, craft) acknowledges contributions that formal economy and media ignore

**They carry political critique:** Every posthumous award is an implicit acknowledgement that the person deserved recognition during their lifetime but was not given it — a structural critique of institutional delay

### Gallantry Awards — Beyond War

The 2026 Gallantry Awards broke new ground by awarding the Ashoka Chakra to Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla for space exploration — the first time India’s highest peacetime gallantry went to an astronaut. This reflects a philosophical evolution: **courage in the service of scientific exploration is as legitimate as**

**courage in combat.** It mirrors the US's highest civilian honour (Congressional Medal of Honour has been given for non-combat acts) and reflects India's aspiration to be a space-faring nation where astronauts are national heroes.

## The Parade — Spectacle with Purpose

The Republic Day parade is often criticised as militaristic spectacle. But three structural purposes justify it:

**Democratic accountability of the armed forces:** The public parade of military capabilities before the civilian-elected President reinforces the constitutional principle of civilian supremacy

**Cultural unity:** The State/UT tableaux are India's most visible annual reminder of its 28+8 federal diversity — Maharashtra's Warli art next to Assam's Bihu next to Karnataka's Yakshagana

**Signalling:** The display of indigenous defence technology (LR-AShM in 2026) conveys to adversaries and allies alike where India's defence industry stands

## THE VANDE MATARAM QUESTION

The 2026 theme — 150 years of Vande Mataram — surfaced a perennial tension. Vande Mataram carries extraordinary nationalist meaning for many Indians while remaining contested in its later stanzas for some communities. The government's embrace of the song's anniversary was a cultural-nationalist assertion; critics noted it risked reinforcing a particular version of India's composite identity.

The constitutional resolution of the Vande Mataram question — adopting only the first two stanzas as the National Song, leaving the rest outside official status — is itself an example of the Indian constitutional tradition of deliberate ambiguity as a form of inclusive governance. It is worth preserving.

## THE ARGUMENT FOR INSTITUTIONALISING REPUBLIC DAY REFORMS

Despite its grandeur, Republic Day suffers from a structural gap: **it celebrates the Constitution without discussing its content.** Unlike the annual addresses before Parliaments in Westminster systems, or the State of the Union address in the US, India's Republic Day has no constitutional moment of civic reflection — no public reading of fundamental rights, no accountability address to citizens.

A reform worth considering: the President of India's **Republic Day Address from Rashtrapati Bhavan** (the televised address that precedes the parade) could be transformed from a general message to a **constitutional state-of-the-nation** — addressing the health of fundamental rights, the state of the judiciary, and the status of constitutionalism. This would give Republic Day its missing civic content.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

*Republic Day constitutional significance (Jan 26, 1950); January 26, 1930 (Purna Swaraj Diwas, Lahore Congress 1929); Government of India Act 1935; Constitution adopted November 26, 1949; Kartavya Path; Padma Awards (instituted 1954; given by President; not “titles” under Article 18); Ashoka Chakra (highest peacetime gallantry); Vande Mataram (National Song, composed 1876, Anandmath 1882, Article 51A(a)).*

*India’s composite nationalism – Vande Mataram controversy, Hindu symbolism in nationalist culture. **GS-2:** India’s “multi-alignment” foreign policy; India-EU strategic partnership; civilian honours and democratic values; role of constitutional symbolism in Indian democracy; President’s constitutional role (ceremonial vs substantive); Indian federalism through cultural tableaux; Article 51A fundamental duties and national symbols.*

## ★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

### CONSTITUTIONAL REPUBLIC DAY FACTS:

Constitution came into force: **January 26, 1950**

Constitution adopted: **November 26, 1949** (Constitution Day = November 26 since 2015)

January 26, 1930: **Purna Swaraj Diwas** — INC declared complete independence as goal (Lahore Session, December **1929**, presided by **Jawaharlal Nehru**)

Supreme law replaced: **Government of India Act, 1935**

1950 Republic Day was India's 1st; 2026 = **77th** (or 76 years since first)

### PADMA AWARDS (INSTITUTIONAL):

Instituted: **1954** | Given by: **President of India**

Committee: Chaired by **Cabinet Secretary**

Article 18: Abolishes titles of honour; SC: Padma awards not "titles"

### GALLANTRY AWARD PHILOSOPHY:

Param Vir Chakra: wartime; Ashoka Chakra: peacetime — both highest in their class

2026 innovation: Ashoka Chakra for space exploration (Shubhanshu Shukla)

### VANDE MATARAM:

Author: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay | Composed: **1876**

Published: *Anandmath* **1882** | First sung at INC: **1896** (Calcutta)

Official status: **National Song** (first two stanzas) | FD: Article **51A(a)**

### INDIA'S MULTI-ALIGNMENT ARCHITECTURE:

Quad: India-US-Japan-Australia (Indo-Pacific security)

SCO: India-Russia-China-Central Asia (Eurasian multilateralism)

BRICS: South-South cooperation

iCET: India-US (critical & emerging technology)

IMEC: India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (G20, 2023)

India-EU Security & Defence Partnership: January 27, **2026**

India-EU FTA: Concluded January **2026**

Sources: The Hindu, PIB, President of India

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