

A salute to Captain Harshan

M.P. Anil Kumar Saturday, August 25, 2007 at 0000 hrs

How can we ensure that the memory of soldiers who die for the country lives on?

Given the strength of Keralites serving in the Indian Air Force, it could be re-spelled as 'India Nair Force'! Kerala has the second largest contingent of veterans, but since the state never directly bore the ravages of war, there was little appreciation of the sacrifices of the men-at-arms. Which forced a Malayali officer during the 1971 war to quip tongue in cheek that he wouldn't mind his home bombed as long as that triggered regard among the Keralites for soldiering and the untold toll extracted by war.

Kargil 1999 changed all that. Satellite television brought the bloody clash to regain the craggy peaks and the dogs of war to the drawing rooms. Like elsewhere, it engendered a surge of goodwill in Kerala too towards the armed forces. But, like all else in our country, this too waned with time. The martyrdom of Captain R. Harshan has rekindled the esteem.

Harshan, an alumnus of Sainik School Kazhakootam, had unflinchingly tracked foreign terrorists during his tour of duty in J&K. Despite being badly wounded in a gun fight, he stood his ground and killed two terrorists in Lolab (North Kashmir) on March 20 this year before succumbing to the gunshots. He was posthumously conferred the Ashok Chakra — the peacetime Param Vir Chakra — this Independence Day for his devotion to duty.

Harshan hailed from Manacaud in Thiruvananthapuram. My classmate C.V. Suresh said he was surprised to see multitudes thronging the in-state

exequies of the martyr. The doleful atmosphere, the whole town awash with Harshan's garlanded portraits and tricolour-buntings choked him. He felt Kerala had crossed the Rubicon.

A fighter pilot now hors de combat, my heart goes out to Harshan's parents and brothers. Gallantry gongs and posthumous solatia are all very well but these are scant consolation to the bereaved. Our nation needs to do more to support the families of those who lay down their lives to preserve India's integrity. How can we ensure they never vanish from the nation's focus? Can't the accounts of their valour go into the textbooks to inspire schoolkids?

Our print and visual media are always thick with the shenanigans of self-seekers of all hues. Can't the media set aside a tad of prime space for the martyrs instead of relegating their selfless sacrifice as fillers? The Indian Express was instrumental in founding war memorials at Pune and Chandigarh, and has lingered foursquare behind the soldier. Maybe it can begin by carrying fitting obituaries of every martyr on its front page.

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