

Women in Military in India: The Cry for Parity

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Abstract: Gunnar Myrdal in his "Asian Drama" argued that the traditional societies cannot modernize themselves, unless they recast their traditional institutions, beliefs and values, to suit the demands of development. But, India has proved that it is not necessarily true, particularly, in the restructuring of gender relations in the workplace. Women have proved their worth, not to the exclusion of their male counterparts. But, Indian women have distinguished themselves by working shoulder to shoulder with men. Yet, the women made their own mark and proved a cut above the rest in so many areas of performance. The Indian State has also supported them. In the final document of the Vienna Conference, States formally recognized the human rights of women to be an integral, inalienable and indivisible part of universal human rights. They further demanded that the equal status of women and the human rights of women...be integrated into the mainstream of...the United Nations human rights activities.

The World Bank had observed that empowerment stands for expansion of assets and capacities of the marginalized groups, especially women, to participate and control institutions, regulating their life. There are four elements in this process, namely, a) access to information, b) inclusion and participation, c) accountability and d) networking with other social groups, to mount pressure on power. Empowerment implies providing freedom of choice, voice and the public space, so that the women can develop their latent talent. Women in the workplace require room for ventilating their merit and occupying spaces on that basis.

Indian Constitution has protected rights of Indian women along with the male counterpart. Article 14 in the Indian Constitution ensures equality in political, economic and social spheres. Article 16 provides for equality of opportunities in matters of public appointment for all citizens. Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex etc. Article 15 (3) of the Indian Constitution allows the State to make any special provision for women and children. Wife bashing is a favorite sport in India. Women are subject to physical and mental torture by their husbands and their families. Article 39(a) mentions that the State will direct its policies towards securing all citizens, men and women, the right to means of livelihood while Article 39 (c) ensures equal pay for equal work. Article 42 directs the State to ensure just and humane working conditions. The constitution imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen through Article 15 (A) (e) to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. Another law that protects women against a seemingly milder crime is Section 509 of the IPC. This law punishes individuals who have insulted the modesty of a woman. Offensive language, sounds, gestures and intrusion of a woman's privacy are punishable under this law. Outraging the modesty of a woman is also punishable under Section 354 of the IPC. Under this law, an individual who has assaulted a woman, used criminal force on her or outraged her modesty in any other way can be punished with imprisonment of up to 2 years. Laws such as the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, Sati Prevention Act, Dowry Prohibition Act and Indecent Representation of Women (Prevention) Act protect women from the more "traditional" crimes such as rape, abduction, dowry, torture, molestation, sexual harassment and selling of girls into slavery.²

Traditionally, Indian women had a dependency syndrome. (Seth 2001) They had to depend on male members of the family from birth to death. He could be the father, husband or son at each stage of her life. Women have always been misled by the imposed ideal of womanhood.(Devi 1995) The patriarchal society and the system forced her to believe that she had no place in the world of work, outside her home. Man was

the maker of that world. The woman's duty was to make a home for him. The woman should never think of her own identity, independence or ambitions. In the traditional Indian society, the success of a man is expected to be celebrated by his wife, as her own success. However, very rarely, Indian men can appreciate the success of his wife, especially when her progress is more than his own. (Bhattacharyya 2010)

However, Indian women have proved that they can be manifestations of will power, grace, dedication, hard work, brilliance. They raise their bar and break untouched barriers. Innate intelligence and quickness of judgment have been instrumental not only at critical points in their career paths but in day-to-day business life. Closely, involved with this is the capacity for making rapid decisions based on further qualities of knowledge and experience, the ability to communicate, and the talent for persuasion and the ability to win the cooperation, loyalty and trust of colleagues, employees and clients. (Menon 1998)

Women in India have been successful in all fields. They have contributed in the freedom struggle. During the struggle, both men and women took active part in it. Without the support of the men-folk, India's men would not have been successful in their attempt of freeing the country from the chains of bondage.³ Women who are mentally robust, physically fit and highly motivated resent preferential treatment being meted out to them. They want to be treated at par with their male colleagues so that they get a fair opportunity to prove their worth. They do not want to be treated as weaklings as it offends their sensitivities and self-respect.

In the Indian National Army, the contribution of Dr Lakshmi Sahgal in the Indian National Army has been applauded by all. She led around 1000 women soldiers recruited for the Rani of Jhansi regiment, against the British Raj.

Indian Experience After Independence Regarding Women in the Armed Forces

In India, entry of women into the armed forces was limited to the Army Medical Corps, the Army Dental Corps and the Military Nursing Service. It was in early 1990s that a decision was taken to induct them into the non-combat wings of the armed forces as short-service commissioned service officers. The maximum period of recruitment is 14 years. They are inducted into Engineers, Signals, Army Service Corps, Ordnance, Education, Intelligence, Legal Branch and EME (Corps of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers). Presently, the Indian Army counts 2.44 percent women in its ranks, the Indian Navy 3.0 percent and the Indian Air Force 6.7 percent. Apart from the medical corps, army has around 1100 women officers out of 35,000 officers; 700 out of 10,700 officers in the IAF; and 280 out of 8000 officers in the Navy. Women officers serve in non-combat arms (engineering, ordnance, signals, intelligence, education, law, air traffic control among others. IAF has 58 women copter & transport aircraft pilots. Women officers can serve upto 14 yrs only. In 2008, Government approved permanent commission in the legal and educational wings of the three Services. The 2009 batch can opt for permanent commission. Doctors, dentists, nurses get permanent commission. There are 800 women doctors, 90 dentists and 3200 nurses. Government does not admit combat duty for women in infantry, armored corps, mechanized infantry or artillery. Women cannot fly fighters or serve on warships or submarines.⁴

Storming Another Bastion

Recently, an important question has come up regarding providing permanent commission to women in the army. There has been a long-standing demand of the women in the army. The 'glass ceiling', is soon to be cracked. The 'glass ceiling' has been defined as 'a barrier so subtle that it is transparent, yet so strong that it prevents women and minorities from moving up in the management hierarchy.'⁵ Women encounter barriers on the way to occupational mobility. Such barriers serve to create and maintain a glass ceiling that restricts women's career advancement and satisfaction.⁶ Many have stated that the 'last bastion' of patriarchal system in India will soon be conquered by the Indian women. The Indian army is really in the crossroads,

where a new era will soon begin. However, the matter should be taken seriously as it should be remembered that the most important aim of the army is to defend the country. The security of the country cannot be risked for any reason. The efficiency of the military should be the only criterion for recruitment.

Points of Discrimination

1. Sexual Harassment Cry- The Armed forces should ensure safety to the women officers. The acceptability of the women officers among the male soldiers should improve. Most of the soldiers are from rural areas, where the patriarchal mindset is internalized, since the childhood days. So, it is most necessary for the armed forces to instill the changed mindset among them. Many times, sexual harassment cases are dismissed as 'frivolous' and blame 'over-sensitivity' of the women officers. However, there have been cases where sexual harassment has taken place and punishment has been imposed.⁷In one case, a colonel had to lose years and was stripped of his stars and dignity in 2007. ⁸

2. Alleged Lack of Job Satisfaction & Low Acceptance - Women have complained, at times, that they are marginalized and not involved in major decision making. Their minor faults are scrutinized. They have to work twice as hard in order to prove their worth. Some of the women complain that in spite of their technical qualification, they are given routine desk work or task organizing social occasions. Acceptance among the male soldiers is low.

3. Alleged Poor Comfort Level- Most women accepted the fact that their presence amongst males tends to make the environment 'formal and stiff'. Mutual comfort level between men and women colleagues is low. Men miss their light hearted banter which is considered essential to release work tensions and promote group cohesion. They consider women to be intruding on their privacy. Male jokes can be sexist in nature, which may make the women colleagues uncomfortable.

4. Doubts about Role Definition- Women, in some cases, were confused about the way they should conduct themselves. If they behave lady-like, their acceptance amongst male colleagues is low. On the other hand, their active participation in casual repartee carries the danger of their losing colleagues' respect, at times.

Grievances Put Forward by Women Officers

The Army suffers from acute gender bias to deny permanent commission to women officers who work shoulder to shoulder with male officers to assist and support troops in combat zones. The advocate for Major Seema Singh, a complainant and others made a strong plea for permanent commission status. She stated that the policies for women in the Army not only discriminate her against male officers but also lower her status to that of a jawan/junior commissioned officer, whom she has been leading for 14 years.

Women officers work for the Army for 14 years, which is neither pensionable nor gives her any retirement benefits. She is simply thrown out of the organization after 14 years and that too not on the basis of poor performance but due to her gender and left to fend for herself. This is discriminatory in nature. Some of the unfit gentlemen officers are absorbed in services like Ordnance Corps, Service Corps, Corps of Electrical & Mechanical Engineers, Judge Advocate General, Education Corps, Medical Corps, Dental Corps, Remount and Veterinary Corps, Corps of Engineers, Corps of Signals and Military Intelligence Corps. However, women officers who endure identical job hazards for 14 years are thrown out at the end of 14 years.

4. Women officers and gentlemen officers commissioned into these services are performing similar jobs, undergoing similar professional courses and are being posted to all field and peace postings. There is no

separate charter of duties for women officers or short service commissioned male officers and permanent commissioned male officers.

5. There are women officers commanding Army supply convoys single-handedly through the most militancy-affected areas and winning laurels for the country abroad during UN peace keeping operations in disturbed African countries.¹⁰ But, in India, they are being denied permanent commission.

Many of the applicants were single women supporting their families and facing serious financial hardship because of non-payment of salaries for a considerable period of time.

The bench also issued notice on another application filed by six more women officers whose discharge from the Army was stayed by the Supreme Court on March 4. They alleged that though they have not been released from the Army, they have not been paid salaries since March. They complained that the applicants are posted at various places and they are discharging their respective duties diligently. Despite stay of release order, the Army is not releasing salaries to the applicants with intention to harass the women officers.

Some of the women lady accused the Army of suffering from gender bias in not granting permanent commission to women who work shoulder to shoulder with similarly placed gentlemen officers in non-combat arms of armed forces.¹²

Women army officers awaiting permanent commission have not received their salaries since February this year. In an application before the Supreme Court the officers claimed that non-payment of salary was violation of the Supreme Court order in March this year, which restrained the army from releasing women Short Service Commissioned (SSC) officers. The army had started relieving them although there was no stay order against the HC verdict on March 12, 2010, which directed the army to grant permanent commission to women officers, who joined between 1992 and 2006. A Bench headed by justice J.M. Panchal took the application filed by the ninth batch officers, and directed the army not to release any SSC women officer entitled for permanent commission.

Advocate Meenakshi Lekhi appearing for the women officers, apprised the Bench of justice Panchal and justice H.L. Gokhale of the Army's "defiance". She said the officers were working as per the SC order, but have not received their salaries. Additional Solicitor-General (ASG) Parag Tripathi promised that salaries would be released within a week. The Bench also asked the ASG to file the government's response on another application moved by 11 of the 22 women officers, who were petitioners before the Delhi HC, but had retired while the case was pending. These 11 have requested the Supreme Court to direct the army to reinstate them as per the HC order. Then the government told the SC that it was considering giving permanent commission to women officers in atleast 7 branches of the army. The government has, however, failed to present a detailed proposal on this issue.¹³

Standpoint of the Army Chief

Army Chief General V.K. Singh observed that as far as women officers in the Indian Army are concerned, whatever we have given them to do, they have fared pretty well. They have measured up to whatever work was given to them. He was sure that this is the reason why opportunities are opening up. It is a very gradual process. He added that we are not a country where women have been soldiers for a very long time. This has to evolve slowly. It cannot be done in one press of a switch. The army chief wanted the overall effect of permanent commission to both men and women officers to be studied further. However, he said the two issues should not be linked to each other, though the army had started recruiting women to bridge the

11,000-odd shortfall in the strength of the officer cadre. He also continued that the AV Singh committee's premise has been that there should be smaller permanent commission and large short service commission officers.¹⁴ They are weighing in all aspects before taking action. Recently, the Delhi high court, after hearing the plea of serving women officers, ordered the armed forces to provide permanent commission.¹⁵

Grounds Against Inducting Women in Combat Roles

There is certain logic in not utilizing them in direct ground combat roles. Israel has made it optional for their women officers. To a senior army officer, society is still not ready to face the prospect of our women, as Prisoners Of War or with terrorists. Another logic here is that Indian warships do not have separate facilities for women, in terms of cabins or washrooms. The Indian Air Force feels that it takes to spend Rs 11.66 crores to train a fighter pilot. It takes 13-14 years of active flying by fighter pilots to recover the huge investment, made on them. With woman fighter pilot, this may take a major hit, since they will get married and have children. This will cause disruption in fighter flying schedules. But many feel that these problems are not insurmountable. To a woman officer, all women officers do not go for combat roles, but if one opts in she should have the right to join. Technology is increasingly making attributes like physical toughness redundant.¹⁶ Nevertheless, women in technical fields such as meteorology, weapons development, cryptography, software development, ordinance, navigation, and so forth may be equally capable as men. Some will be superior. In an increasingly technological army, the light-switch phenomenon asserts itself: no special gender advantage for flipping a light switch on or off. This phenomenon — a product of modern technology — is the great equalizer of the sexes.¹⁷

Grounds for Justification of Denying Permanent Commission

The reason was simple. Women officers are neither been trained for command nor given the responsibility so far, a senior officer observed. Women normally get commissioned at the age of 23 to 25 years. Soon, thereafter, family pressures start building up on them to get married. Many women confess that managing married life with military service is difficult, though marrying a service officer helps. Subsequent pregnancy and motherhood prove very demanding.

The forces are going in for a large Short Service Commission base and a lean permanent commission cadre. Granting permanent commission to existing women Short Service Commission officers will hit the entire restructuring process. This must be based on military needs and organizational requirements, not social factors, or pressure exerted by some groups. It has to be a gradual process. There are operational problems in women being deployed along the borders or in counter-insurgency operations.¹⁸

Course Correction

In September 2010, fresh guidelines have been issued regarding recruitment of women officers. But these guidelines have excluded serving and retired women officers.¹⁹ The Delhi High Court has ruled that those who have approached the Court & those who are still serving, they should be extended full-term. Those women officers who have retired by 12th March, 2010 during the Court proceedings, they should be reinstated in service, if they are still within service age limits. That apart, they must be granted all financial facilities including pensions.²⁰ Indian Parliamentary panel has also upheld the justification of awarding permanent commission and full retirement benefits for the women officers in the military service.

Women could become Lt-Colonels and their equivalents in IAF and Navy at the most in these 14 years. But now, women might well make it to one-or two-star general ranks (brigadiers and major-generals) in the years ahead. There have been women major-generals and Lt-Gens earlier but they all belonged to the medical stream. An officer stated that this is in accordance with the government decision in 2008 to grant

permanent commission to women officers in the legal and education wings of the 3 Services, as also the accounts branch of IAF and the 'naval constructor' department of the Navy. In line with this new policy, women being inducted into the armed forces from the 2009 batch onwards will be given the option, a year or two before they complete 10 years in these wings, to opt for permanent commission. The Army Educational Corps is planning to induct more women officers in future, by opening exclusive Sainik (military) schools for women. ²¹

Combat Role

According to the news agency BBC, Cadet Divya Ajith Kumar surpassed almost 230 other cadets, including 70 female peers, to earn the coveted "Sword of Honour" at the Training Academy in Chennai in September 2010. Kumar became the first female cadet to receive the honour after 49 weeks of grueling training. ²²The armed forces remain opposed to combat roles- where chances of physical contact with the enemy are high- for women officers. A senior officer observed that women officers need to be gradually exposed to more and more functions and trained for them progressively. So far, women officers have neither been trained for command nor given the responsibility. Permanent Commission cannot be given to them in a hurry. There has to be a sufficient gestation period.

As a 1st step, women cadets are now undergoing pre-commissioned training at par with male counterparts at the Officers' Training Academy (OTA), Chennai. Earlier, it was 24 weeks for women cadets, but now it is 49 weeks like male cadets. At present, though women officers are inducted into armed forces, since the early 1990s, they can have for a maximum of 14 years only at SSC. Moreover, while they serve in engineering, ordnance, intelligence, signals, education, law, logistics, air traffic control and the like, they are not allowed to fight fighter jets, serve on warships or join "fighting" arms like infantry, armoured corps, and artillery. But, while many women officers are not asking for combat role, they certainly want Permanent Commission. After 14 years, a second career becomes difficult, felt a woman officer. There are just about 950 women officers in the Army out of a total of 35,377; 750 women out of 10,760 officers in the IAF; and 250 women out of 7,394 officers in Navy. Personnel below the officer rank, of course comprise only men. ²³

According to the opinion of a particular group of people it is now commonly accepted that women should be encouraged to join the services only under the following circumstances:

1. When a country is short of men or there are not enough men volunteering to join the forces.
2. When the armed forces of a country are technologically very advanced and there is a huge requirement for highly qualified personnel for high-tech support functions, women can be gainfully employed for the same.
3. Where societal and cultural ethos have matured to the extent that barriers of gender prejudices have vanished and both sexes have adjusted to the desired level of mutual comfort.
4. Where militaries are not deployed on active combat duties and are generally assigned comparatively passive tasks. A number of countries like Canada and Australia induct women in their forces as they are aware that they will never be required to participate in an operation at home or abroad.

The above parameters act as a universally accepted benchmark to determine the need and extent of women's' employment in the forces.

Scene Elsewhere

- Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal and Sweden allow ground combat roles for women.
- Australia, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Denmark, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Portugal, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Tunisia, United Kingdom allow women to serve on combat ships.

- Women in Israel allow women in frontline combat units, but on a voluntary basis. Even the army of Israel, which is most gender neutral, goes by role considered suitability, rather than mere lip service to gender equality.
- Even in a conservative society like Afghanistan, women officers have been inducted.²² Twenty nine women graduated from the Afghanistan National Army Officer Candidate School in September 2010. They will work in finance, logistics and intelligence positions in the Ministry of Defense. There are around 300 Afghan women serving in the Army.
- Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh deploy women on sea-faring warships. The US has deployed them on submarines.
- Even Pakistan has seven women fighter pilots. But India is reluctant.
- China graduated its first class of sixteen women fighter pilots in April 2009.
- In the United States, women constitute 13.4 percent, 15.4 percent and 19.5 percent of Army, Navy and Air Force personnel respectively.²⁴

Suggested Remedies

At the entire training centre curriculum, the value of gender-parity should be internalized by series of achievements of women officers in the forces in other countries and also in India. The attitudes or biases of the male officers should be clearly debated and the myths may be busted. Joint teams of male and female officers may be formed in different training exercises, in order to form better rapport among the trainees. All women groups of lady officers may also be formed to go into theoretical and practical exercises. Their strengths and weaknesses may be analyzed closely. It may well be found that their strengths and weakness nearly resemble those of the male officers.

Not only the cadets but also the officers of the forces at all levels should be sensitized regarding the values of gender parity and gender contribution. Every workplace relies heavily on the quotient of job satisfaction. Any gender exclusion policy is leaving a major slice of women officers unhappy. No organization can afford to carry a baggage of discontent out of discrimination. The officers of the forces may be reminded the contributions of their mothers, wives and daughters in their family lives and such positive features if they are engaged in any public space activity, such as teaching, social service, functionaries in local bodies, like panchayats and municipalities, doctors, engineers, scientists etc. Indeed, right from the top brass, every male officer should be encouraged to motivate their women family members to join the forces. Supposing that one senior officer is exercising gender bias, he may also at the back of his mind be reminded of such fare of disparity to his own family members elsewhere in any other commanding unit.

Essential Prerequisites for Smooth Induction of Women

Change is often accompanied by a measure of initial chaos, which gradually settles down, after sometime. However, an organization like the army simply cannot afford, chaos, since the entire nation's security and honour is at stake. There have been teething problems but these are no more than in any other employment sector. In fact, it is to the credit of the Indian Army that its in-built mechanism of grievance redressal is sufficiently well equipped to deal with such issues. The lady officers seem to be quite happy with their chosen profession. An interaction with them clearly illustrates their professionalism and will to stand tall next to their male colleagues, in the discharge of their duties.

A spirit of comradeship has developed between the younger generation of officers of both genders, who have trained and grown together in service. They exhibit a rare comfort level, which has developed with time. Therefore, it can be safely presumed that the experiment has been a resounding success and there is no case to now look back on the issue. Research has shown that women are more perceptive and intuitive and endowed with organizational skills that help plan right down to minute detail. They have the ability to

empathize and understand. This makes them excel in all such fields that deal with interaction with human personnel. These are fields where women in the army can make a good contribution. On hindsight it seems that the entire debate that was ignited, when the idea was in its nascent stage was not unprecedented.

Whenever, women have first stepped into essentially male worlds, the opposition has always been there. Such debates have had more to do with ideologies, principles, traditions and safety of the women. However now, almost two decades post the event, one can sit back and take a more rational view of things and feel that the idea of women in the Indian Army has finally arrived.

People often wonder as to why women would like to join the Army in the first case. After all it is a tough life with eternal questions of modesty and propriety coming to the fore. The thrill and pride of serving one's motherland is an additional attraction. All this comes along with a well laid down code of conduct that makes things far more orderly, disciplined and easy to adhere to. Some feel that women feel more safe within the Army than they do in other services of a similar genre' in the civil sector. They also have an attractive pay packet.

There is a lot at stake and such decisions should be taken only after careful consideration and gradually. So far, the induction of women into the Indian Army has been a successful experiment and the credit for this goes, both, to the organization as well as the women. In order to ensure that future experiments are just as successful, one must proceed with a measure of foresight and judicious contemplation.²⁵

The experience of the countries that have inducted women in their armed forces need to be studied. They have been certain adjustment problems even in societies that are developed and profess gender equality. Army life requires both mental and physical prowess. Many advanced countries have not inducted women in fighting units. They have been taking precautions to ensure followed by others. Every nation has to weigh its options against the backdrop of its own that women are neither pitched against enemy in face-to-face direct combat nor exposed to the risk of capture by the adversary. It is imprudent to replicate the model or path social and environmental mores. Every country has its own social/cultural moorings, type of hostilities encountered, level of technology and larger manpower issues.

Conclusion

There are some subjective and objective grounds, adduced for denial of permanent commission to the women officers in the armed forces. In the Indian Army and Air Force, permanent commission has already been granted to women officers. All of them have proved their worth; busting the myth that quality will go downwards. One subjective plea is that the rural based soldiers are not used to taking orders from a woman officer. But, this attitude can be overcome by the example of merit-based promotions and leadership roles of the women officers. The women officers can definitely be considered for pc, after case-to-case scrutiny by a selection committee. This committee should comprise of lady officers. The alleged cases of gender exploitation and harassment are a handful, compared to the total strength of the defense and military officers. In those cases, the law and the concept of human dignity, may take its own course. These are isolated instances, and should not be blown-up, out of proportions.

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