

WOMEN IN COMBAT

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Abstract

Military historians once believed that women's military participation dates back to World War I. However, historian BARTON HACKER has described in his research work that women have served in mobile armies as camp followers for centuries. Women empowerment and defence system in growing interdisciplinary research work ambivalent in the contemporary militaries the world over. In the Indian environment women's role in the Armed force can be traced back 1888. Interestingly it has now been source of attraction visibly encapsulated by media when an English National daily on 9 November on its front page carried a news item 'Haryana Girls break glass ceiling line up for Army Rally'. It is therefore imperative to analyze women's participation in foreign armies and then discuss avenues open for the Indian women with Armed Forces and service challenge to put it in correct perspective.

Women in Foreign Armies

Women served in two World Wars not only as a man power reserve but as a support service to the Armed Forces as well. During the World War II Russian Women also served in Armed Combat while Canadian women were placed in rear areas, Incidentally in the ongoing more than 9 months Russian-Ukraine War, women have been and continue to participate in the combat Zone, able in a limited manner which has also exposed the hazards of being taken as Prisoner of War (Pow). As per 1986 Census Canadian Women formed 9.1 Percent (Pc) of their total military force. In 1978 Netherland gave Women access to military jobs. In Britain Women's participation in their Army was 5.1 PC sometime back. US Armed Forces opened their ranks for mass enrolment of women and during Vietnam War 75 PC of them were Nurses. Women now comprises about 9.5 PC of the personnel of the US Armed Force.

In France though women comprise about 1/5th of the Military in some services except riot control. Since 2014, Women were allowed to serve in combat role but many chose not to opt for fighting. Australia opened front line combat role in 2013 but in a protracted manner. Similarly countries like Israel, New Zealand, Germany, Canada etc. have allowed women in combat mostly in Artillery Air Defence System and as rescue force where they are not at a risk of being taken captive.

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HOME FRONT

It was during 1992 that the Indian Government took a historic decision to induct women into the defence service when they had been doing very well as Doctors and Nurses since World Wars days. Additional avenues were opened for women in support role such as Army Service corps (ASC), ordinance, Signals Engineers, Air Defence, Judge Advocate General (JAG) Education as short Service Commissioned Officers (SSCO) initially for 5 years extendable to another 5 years and finally 4 years in phases thus making 14 years of total service. A lady officer can attain the rank of Colonel after successful completion of 13 years of service. Air Force and Navy has now opened the doors in fighter stream and they do not have and Command the troops.

As per available information Army had 6807 women officers, Air Force 1607 and Navy 1704 thus making a total Strength of Women with Armed to forces 9118. Pertinent mention that from medical profession Lt. Gen Punita Arora (Dr) was the first three star General Officer in the Indian Army. Air Force had first Women Air Marshal Padmavathy Bandhopadhyay. Similarly from Nursing Service some Officers had attained the rank of two star General. Maj. Gen. Jasbir Kaur Grewal, VSM (Retd) from Amritsar also happens to be one of the role model.

In the past some Women SSCO had moved the High Court for the grant of permanent Commission like male counter parts, Nurses, Medical Officers and sought an end to prejudicial treatment. High Court accepted their plea. Army Headquarters after the verdict moved the supreme court. In an affidavit filed in the year 2012, inter alia stated this "In Principal confederation of men and women in Armed Forces appears to be a good step but in reality the experience has not been quite successful and our society as yet not prepared to accept-women in the combat position".

PM Narendra Modi on 15th August, 2018 said in his address from ramparts of the Red Fort that SSC Women Officers will now be eligible for Permanent Commission. During the ongoing case in the Supreme Court, Bench decided in favour of the petitioners and directed the Department of Military Affairs and work out the modalities and selectively to the eligible SSC Women Officers be granted PC.

Through the intake of women officers into the Armed Forces commenced in 1992 but their recruitment in other ranks is a recent development and they are required to meet the physical and medical standard as per the terms and conditions. In this context most of the 750 girls who participated in a recruitment Rally at Ambala Cantt on 7th or 8th November were from Haryana some others from Himachal Pradesh, Delhi and Chandigarh as per the media reports.

It is pertinent to mention that the Govt. decided to recruit girls into the corps of Military Police in May 2021 after a 61 weeks intensive training. The Army Plans to induct about 1700 women soldiers over the next few years. This is a beginning and not the end.

Analysis and Recommendations

No one will doubt the leadership traits like depend acivility, discipline, dedication, spirit of self sacrifice, endurance, commitments towards the Nation and so on like male service personnel. On the contrary, they have multifarious responsibilities and role of a wife and mother per say are very challenging and demanding and as a daughter and sister no less? The question arise how will our conservative society basically rural based, like KhappPanchayat, soon would view when their daughters, wives, sisters, mothers during Combat rub shoulders with male colleagues while laying ambush, saids, carry out clandestine operating behind enemy lines for that matter accomplish Modi'sfavourite surgical strikes and Para commando missions and spend nights in submarines etc.

Combatant soldiers are trained to kill or destroy the enemy and it possible caphirealine even if it involves hand to hand fight. The enemy during tactical operations always look for soft targets particularly it happens to be more attractive. "How will the troops respond during the final assault on the enemy by a lady company or Battalion Commander? At present there is a shortage of about 9000 male Officers in the armed forces and only one Lakh Jawans. It will be a good thing to make up the shortfall, but they cannot be left behind during war.

Pertinent to mention during Gulf war, a black Hawk Helicopter carrying Major RHONDA CORNUN, an army flight surgeon was shot down over Iraq whie trying to rescue a downed F-16 Pilot. She became POWand suffered all kinds of brutality and humiliation. Same thing happened to lady officer during Russian-Ukrain war. At home during Kargil operation, the kind of torture and barbaric treatment meted out to Capt Saurab Kalia is well known to the country men & many other such cases.

There are many isolated piequets LOC and LAC being held by a section and platoon strength primarily manned by NCO, JCos and young officers, where the living condition requires improvement, administrative & space constraints on the lofty peaks are many having biological and psychological impact particularly in high altitude areas. Romantic relationship between men & women on the front line could affect the operational efficiency.

Dr (Mrs.) Meena Dutta, Professor and Coordinator with Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Punjab University, author of book "Defence Economics" has also published lot of research papers including the one on National Security. While writing on women in Armed Force, She has in her recommendations recorded "As a society and country, we still have a long

way to go & accept our daughters & wives as warriors on the front line. However, there is a requirement to increase the role of women in Armed Forces.

Having served for three and half decades in the Army, mostly in the forward areas and also having footed almost every hill of J&K including 1971 Indo-Pak war, knowing the operational parameters and prevailing conditions, I tend to agree with the former Army Chief that the time is not ripe for women to be inducted in the front line as yet. However, there is a need to increase the quota of women in SSCO in the selection non Combat services and gradually start inducting women in lower ranks like military police. NDA stream entry & Agnipath schemes require fresh look.

As per mythology of a particular community, specially those who are radicalised believe that if they get killed in the fire or by women's bullet then they will not get celestial nymph (ਜੁਰਾਂ-ਪਰੀਆਂ) in the next world. There is a need to raise a woman infantry Battalion first as a trial basis and likely should be employed in hostile environments particularly where proxy war is in full swing the result will be the phenomenal. Subsequently they could move up in the battlefield environments when there is a dire necessity. This will be in the National & Women interest.