



## Representation of Women in the Indian Armed Forces: A Social Science Perspective

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### **Abstract**

The armed forces play a crucial role in safeguarding the security and sovereignty of any nation. At the same time, gender equality remains equally significant for the overall development and progress of that nation. Women constitute nearly half of India's population, and neglecting their potential would mean overlooking a substantial contribution to national advancement. Women form the foundation of families, families build communities, and communities ultimately shape the nation. Historically and socially, women have played a vital role in ensuring stability, progress, and sustainable development.

In contemporary times, women have established their presence across diverse professional domains, including areas traditionally dominated by men. The military is one such field where women have demonstrated dedication, competence, and courage, contributing significantly to national defence and various operational campaigns. However, due to long-standing perceptions regarding physical strength and gender roles, women have often been viewed as less suited for combat and defence services. As a result, their participation in the armed forces has remained limited.

This research article attempts to examine the representation of women in the Indian Armed Forces by analysing issues related to gender bias, structural challenges, and social perceptions. The study seeks to move beyond conventional discussions of women's issues and aims to highlight pathways for ensuring stronger and more equitable representation of women within the Indian Armed Forces.

**Key Words:** Armed Forces, Military, Women, Gender Equality, Security, Defence.

### **Introduction**

In the historical tradition of the Indian Army, women have not held the same place as men. Because of their physical constitution, women have always been considered weaker than men. The capacity of women for defence services is considered less than that of men. Though from time to time, women have been setting examples of courage and bravery. Their bravery has been such that it has changed Indian male authoritarian mindset and women are now considered equal. Man has been bound to consider the capacities as equivalent. At present, women are showing their indomitable courage and leadership in all fields. Women are playing an important role not only in the development and progress of society but also in the country. Without them, a developed and prosperous society and country cannot be imagined. There is a



popular saying that if you are educating a man, then you are only educating a man. You are educating men only, but if you are educating a woman, then you are educating your whole generation. It is very important for the development of society and country that girls be educated because they have to give a new direction to society and country along with the boys in the coming times. Today, they cannot be ignored. As less powerful and less virtuous than a man. Today, women are walking step by step and shoulder to shoulder with men. Even the field of the armed forces has not remained untouched. Be it Indira Gandhi as the Defence Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, President Pratibha Patil as the supreme commander of all three forces, or Draupadi Murmu, the surveyor of this area and its first citizen, it is a matter of pride not only for women but also for the country.

Woman through their significant role in the Indian Armed Forces, have set new benchmarks of self-confidence and courage. Not only this but many women military officers in the military field have also worked to change the perception of people towards women on the strength of their indomitable courage, that is why the Supreme Court's latest decision regarding a permanent commission for women in the Indian Armed Forces (Secretary, Ministry of Defense vs. Babita Punia) is considered to be an important step towards women empowerment. (1) The Court held that restricting women to only Short Service Commission would be violative of Article 14 of the Constitution, which guarantees equality to all citizens of the country. The decision was hailed as a "major leap" in the direction of equality in the military, as seen. Because this decision means that now all women officers will be at par with men in terms of promotion, rank, benefits, and pension. (2) But still there is a need for an integrated study to enhance the role of women in the army and to understand the various socio-economic aspects related to this subject so that India can face and meet the challenges expected in this field shortly.

### **Changing status of women in india**

The status of women in India has not always been the same. With time, there have been continuous changes in their status; that is, from the Vedic period to the modern period, there have been many ups and downs in their status. (3) Even their rights have undergone continuous changes. The position of women was strong to a great extent in the Vedic period. They had equal rights with men in education and property. He was respected in the family and society. They had the opportunity to participate freely in the assembly and committees. Although there are some such sayings in the Rigveda in which opposition to women is visible, they are still equally respected in every sphere of Hindu social life. She was considered a goddess (Sahadharmini, Ardhangini, Sahachari). The status of women in the Vedic period and later Vedic period can also be ascertained from this verse, in which it is said that "Yatra Naryastu Puhyante Ramante Tatra Devta". But institutionally, the degradation of women started in the post-Vedic period, when many restrictions were imposed on their freedom and independence.

In the mediaeval period, the condition of women became even more pitiable. As a result of atrocities and sexual exploitation by Muslim invaders, evils such as Sati Pratha, Jauhar Pratha, child marriage, the ban on widow remarriage, Purdah Pratha, etc. were included in the Indian social system. Despite these circumstances, some women achieved success in the fields of politics, literature, education, and religion. In which Sultan Razia, the only woman to rule Delhi, Maharani Durgavati of Gond, Chand Bibi of Ahmednagar, Noor Jahan, influential on the Mughal imperial power, Kavithri K., Mughal princesses Jahanara and Zebunnisa, Shivaji's mother Jijabai, etc. are noteworthy. Not only this, but many women of South India successfully ruled villages, cities, and districts and started social and religious institutions.

Bhakti movements, Sikh gurus, and social and economic reform movements have played a very important role in removing the decline in the status of women due to the arrival of foreign invaders in the mediaeval period.



The period of resurgence of women in the modern period can be considered from the British period. During this period of 200 years, many changes were made in the Indian social and economic structures. Due to this, there were many improvements in the lives of women, both directly and indirectly. Prior to the attainment of independence, the main reasons for the low condition of women were illiteracy, economic dependence, caste restrictions, religious prohibition, a lack of women's leadership, and unfair attitudes like the feeling of superiority of men over women. One of the main reasons for keeping women behind in the mainstream of society has also been the predominance of male-centric Sanskrit in a patriarchal society.

After the attainment of independence, this situation was realised by Indian policy makers and governments, and many welfare schemes and developmental programmes like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao were implemented to improve the economic, social, educational, and political status of women and to integrate them into the mainstream of development. And policies like the Sharda Act have been implemented.

From the middle of the 19th century to the 21st century, there has been a vast improvement in the status of women, and new dimensions of achievements have been established by women in various fields such as educational, political, social, economic, religious, administrative, sports, medicine, etc. Are. Today, women are self-reliant, self-made, and self-confident, due to which they are showing their ability even in male-dominated challenging areas.

There has been a change in the status of women by giving them the same rights as men through various constitutional rights laws. The main reason for the change in the status of women is their 'economic self-reliance', due to which they have also got the 'right to decide'. In the changing environment, the attitude of women's economic dependence, helpful in dealing with family economic and social challenges, has also changed the mindset of men towards women. But still, the increasing cases of atrocities on women in Indian society like dowry death, rape, feticide, child marriage, and domestic violence show that a patriarchal system exists in the country, and Indian society is still not free from the existing patriarchal or male-dominated system. It has yet to come out. Women will be able to get the right to equality and security without discrimination in society only when their "mind" is accepted, not just their "physical structure".

### **Women in the Armed Forces: The Global Experience**

Traditionally, women were not involved in direct combat roles as values such as physical strength and courage dominated the wars of the past. At this time, it was a general belief that men would make better soldiers because of their perceived aggressiveness and physical prowess. Because of this, the responsibility of protecting the country and its borders should be given only to men. Considering women to be physically weak, their role was limited to the kitchen and the courtyard of the house, but with their self-confidence and courage, women have now shown the scope of this courtyard to be much bigger. As a parallel second force to men in the global arena, women today have the ability to excel in various fields such as politics, education, medicine, management, sports, and defence, compete with their male counterparts, and even succeed. is capable.

Women have been well-represented in the armed forces of most countries in the world. It is noteworthy that the first large-scale mobilisation of women for military purposes was carried out during World War I, after the Industrial Revolution. Although even at that time their role was mainly limited to cooks, clerks, nurses, and other support work. (4) Even during the Second World War, there is clear evidence of the recruitment of women soldiers in large numbers by the 'Allied and Axis' powers. Most of them were voluntary. In 1945, the Indian National Army of Subhash Chandra Bose fought against the British. All the women soldiers of the 'Jhansi Regiment' were raised to act as guerilla infantry to fight.



Women's participation increased with the official recognition of women as full members of the armed forces in the 1940s. Women were officially recognised as a permanent part of the US Armed Forces in 1948, in the UK in 1949, and in Canada in 1951. In other countries, the first batch of women soldiers joined in the 1980s or 1990s. The recruitment of women in the Indian Armed Forces began in 1992. Initially, recruitment was largely limited to the Army Medical Corps, Army Dental Corps, and Military Nursing, while in some countries such as New Zealand, Israel, and Canada, all positions, including combat roles, have been open to women. Although women in frontline combat roles in armies have been a controversial issue around the world, (5) According to National Geographic, at least 16 industrialised nations allow women to serve on the front lines or in combat roles.

It was only in 2018 that the UK military lifted its ban on women serving in close combat roles, allowing them to serve in elite special forces. Has served for more than a century. The UK currently has around 11% women in the regular forces. (6)

Women have served in the US military in non-combat roles, and in 2016, the United States lifted the Pentagon's ban on allowing women into frontline combat roles. Beginning in the 1990s, women began serving in the US military in aviation and naval combat, and in 2019, approximately 2,906 female personnel held positions in ground combat, a position that was only opened to them in 2016.

China's People's Liberation Army Ground Force (PLAGF), the world's largest military, has a ground force that consists of about five percent or less of female officers. This means that out of its 1.4 million soldiers, only 53,000 are women.

Countries such as Canada, Denmark, and Israel opened combat roles to women in the mid- and late-80s. In 1989, Canada allowed women in combat roles; Denmark had a total inclusion policy since 1988; and in 1985, Israel began recruiting women into combat positions. In the mid-1980s, Norway became the first North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) country to allow women to join the military in an all-combat capacity. India's ally Israel has been inducting both men and women into military service since its creation in 1948. Women are expected to serve in the military for two years, except for exemptions during motherhood or religious belief. However, it does not allow women to hold command positions.

According to the IISS, women make up 10 percent of the Russian Armed Forces. Although women have long served as volunteers in the Russian (and formerly Soviet) military, women were officially allowed to enlist on contract by presidential decree in November 1992. In May 2020, Defence Minister Shoygu stated that the Russian Armed Forces consisted of approximately 41,000 women, which according to official figures is approximately 4.26 percent of the total active duty forces. (7)

### **Women in the Indian Armed Forces**

The Indian Armed Forces, comprising the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard under the Ministry of Defence, epitomise the spirit of valour, bravery, and selfless service to the nation. The supreme command of all three armies rests with the President of India. Selfless service to the nation is a major factor in patriotism, which is implemented by the armed forces. Traditionally, men have served the nation through their contributions to the Indian Armed Forces, but at present, not only men but also women are equally playing an integral role in each section of the Indian Armed Forces. Today, there are an increasing number of military formations. There is testimony to the fact that the induction of women in various fields of the Armed Forces has enhanced their operational efficiency.

Historically, Indian women have been serving in the army since the formation of the 'Indian Military Nursing Service' in 1888 before the First World War, but till the year 1991, women in the Indian Armed Forces were allowed only as medical personnel (doctors and nurses). was assigned the role. But since 1992, women's horizons have expanded in the history



of the Indian Armed Forces with the induction of women in other corps of the armed forces, and women have been appointed under the Short Service Commission in various corps such as law, logistics, education, architecture, engineering, and inducted as officers in the Executive Cadre. 8).

The induction of women in the Indian Army was started with the grant of the SSC for 5 years in 1991 by the Cabinet Committee. The first batch consisted of 25 women officers who were commissioned in the Army Service Corps (A.S.C.), Army Ordnance Corps (A.O.C.), Army Education Corps (A.E.C.), and as judges in 1993. Commissioned at the End by the Advocate General (JAG).

In the year 2008 A. E.C. and J.A.G. Women officers were given permanent commissions in 1956; since then, the time limit for them to serve in the army was increased to 14 years. With the implementation of permanent commissioning of women in the Indian Army in the year 2020, they will get the same benefits that male officers have been getting till now. (9)

At present, women officers are being posted in the Army Service Corps (ASC), Army Ordnance Corps (AOC), Electronic and Medical Engineering (EME), Signal, and Army Air Corps, apart from the Medical Corps. are being inducted into services such as combat support arms of defence (AAD). However, several cases have been filed for the grant of a permanent commission in the infantry and combat armed forces like engineers, artillery, and AAD. In the 1.4 million-strong Indian Army, women constitute 0.56%, while the figure is 1.08% in the Air Force and 6.5% in the Navy. (10)

It is clear that where women constitute 48 percent of our population, (11) the representation of women in the Indian Armed Forces is very less than that of men; that is, men still hold the monopoly on key positions, but despite this disparity, the armed forces have been continuously deployed over the years. There has been an increase in the number of women in the armed forces.

### **Indian Army**

In 1888, the role of women in the Indian military began when the "Indian Military Nursing Service" was formed during the British Era. (12)

After India's independence, military nurses were given regular commissions as per the Act of 1950. 13) Women have been serving in the armed forces for more than ten decades, having joined the nursing corps. It was not until 1992 that the role of women expanded to other areas in the armed forces. From 1992, under the Short Service Commission, women were commissioned for 5 years in the Army Service Corps, Army War Corps, Army Education Corps, and the Judge Advocate General's Department. In 1996, the 5-year SSC was extended to 10 years. To ensure gender equality in the defence service, women started entering the intelligence corps along with the electrical and mechanical engineering corps. Additionally, in 2004, the term of service for women in the armed forces was increased to 14 years. Women have been posted in various corps, like AOS and J.A. Yes. and E.M.E., which constitute 3.80% of the workforce of the Indian Army. The first Sainik Schools that fielded future armed forces officers were only open to boys. In 2018, the government opened it for girls.

In 2020, women were inducted for the first time into 8 more corps as Permanent Commission Officers. As of 2020, women are not allowed as combatants in parachute regiments of the Indian Army or other specialist forces but can join the paratroopers wing of their respective arms, such as Para EME, Para Signal, Para ASC, etc. (14)

### **Indian Air Force**

The Indian Air Force is the only branch that inducts women in all roles. The Indian Air Force began inducting women as transport and helicopter pilots in 1994. Since then, women have played a major role in maintaining the high morale of the Indian Air Force by actively



participating in the welfare and social activities of the Air Force. On implementation of the decision given, 41 women were granted permanent commission. Women officers in the Indian Air Force are performing their duties as pilots, navigators, technical officers, and ground duty branch officers along with their male counterparts. (15) In 2015, a decision was taken by the Government of India to include women in the fighter stream. The first batch of women officers were commissioned into fighter jets in 2016. Women officers of the Indian Air Force have been part of major operations like the Balakot air strike as 'Combat Controllers'.

The Indian Air Force has seen a gradual increase in the recruitment of women in the early stages of the 21st century. Data published by the Government of India shows that the overall percentage in the year 2019 was 13.9%, while in 2010 it was only 6.7%. In the year 2019, more than 1900 women officers, including 8 fighter pilots, were inducted into the Indian Air Force. Whereas before 2015, there were no women in the fighter stream.

### **Indian Navy**

The Indian Navy has been inducting women as short-service commissioning officers in some branches since 1992. The Indian Navy has opened doors for women to join the armed forces, from three branches in 1992 to 11 branches in 1999. are given. Today, women are inducted into various branches like supervisory law, logistics, education, piloting, and others. Recently, the Government of India has given permanent commissions to women in the education branch, law, and naval architecture. After 26 years of recruiting women in the Navy, India got its first woman pilot in the Naval Armament Inspection Branch in 2019. (16) The total percentage of women recruited in the Indian Navy has increased from 3% in 2010 to 6% in 2019. In the year 2017, the all-female team of six members was awarded the I.N. VS. Navikasagar was sent on a voyage named Paprika on Tarini. He successfully visualised the world.

### **Indian Coast Guard**

The Indian Coast Guard was established in 1978 as an armed force. The Indian Coast Guard is mandated to protect India's maritime territory. Women are recruited in the Coast Guard for general duties as pilots and law officers. Although the Coast Guard is an independent armed force under the Ministry of Defence, it works in close cooperation with the Indian Naval Wing. The Indian Coast Guard has been training women since 1997 as permanent appointees as assistant commandants in general duty. (17) The Coast Guard is the only force under the Ministry of Defence that has given permanent commissions to women since its inception. Earlier, the force used to recruit women in every field except frontline guarding. In 2017, the Indian Coast became the first force under the Ministry of Defence to deploy women officers in combat roles to patrol India's vast and vulnerable maritime zone. This is a big step taken by the government towards women's empowerment. It is noteworthy that there has been a steady increase in the number of women recruited every year since the inception of the Indian Coast Guard. Women in the Coast Guard are trained to handle all the missions that come under the Coast Guard Charter, which includes boarding.

### **Conclusion**

The upliftment of women has been the relevant objective of almost every nation in the present era. The development of any nation is undoubtedly linked to gender equality. Over the past decades, women have come a long way, not only in military fields but also in other fields like politics and business. Women have reached great heights in almost all the fields that were otherwise male-centric. Women have undoubtedly been at par with their male counterparts. The Government of India is constantly making all efforts for the development of the nation as a whole and the upliftment of women in society. The process of training women has started at the roots of the armed forces. The admission of girls to military schools that train future defence



officers, which were initially meant only for boys, is evident in the government's effort to achieve gender equality as enshrined in the Constitution of India. As mentioned earlier, women have been given various benefits like permanent commissions and an increase in the number of women candidates in the armed forces. This is the way forward for women who aspire to join the defence services. Apart from these benefits, women officers are given other additional facilities in the defence sector. Previously, women were not allowed to use the Leave Travel Concession during Child Care Leave, but now they can. The defence sector is trying to provide a work-friendly environment for women by giving them freedom at the workplace. Women are treated on par with their male counterparts during training sessions and decision-making, thereby maintaining gender equality in the workplace. To prevent any kind of harassment against women at the workplace, the Vishaka Guidelines and the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013 have been implemented in all the commands of the Defence Wing. Women married to serving officers are posted together. Women are also provided with many other after-service medical facilities.

Thus, it can be said that there has been a positive change in the representation of women in the Indian Armed Forces, yet there is still a huge gap as compared to their male counterparts. Although women have now been granted permanent commissions in the armed forces by the Supreme Court, combat roles are still closed to them. There is still a long way to go to achieve equality in this area in a patriarchal society. To achieve the equality enshrined in the Constitution of India, more policies and frameworks are needed to include women in combat roles as well as recruit equal numbers of women in the military.

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