

Women in Combat: The Rise of Women in Defense Forces

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ABSTRACT

The role of women in the Indian Armed Forces has evolved significantly over the past decades, shifting from supportive roles to leadership and, more recently, combat positions. This article outlines the historical milestones that have shaped women's inclusion in India's defense services, starting from their entry during World War II and leading up to the landmark Supreme Court ruling of 2020 that granted women permanent commission status. Despite these advances, women in the Indian military still encounter challenges, including limited access to certain combat roles, gender bias, and societal perceptions of traditional gender norms. In this article, we explore the historical milestones that have shaped women's participation in the Indian Armed Forces, the challenges they continue to face, and the path ahead toward full integration and equality. By examining the role of women in shaping modern defense strategies and leadership, the article offers a comprehensive overview of their contributions and the path forward for an inclusive Indian Armed Forces.

Keywords: combat, defense, nari shakti

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of women in defense forces worldwide has evolved dramatically over the last century. They have progressed from being limited to supportive or auxiliary roles to serving on the frontlines, commanding combat units, and leading strategic operations in modern military institutions. Women in the Indian defense forces embody relentless determination, taking on roles that were once unimaginable for them. Their journey is one of breaking barriers, driven by an unwavering dedication to serve their country. Whether flying fighter jets at supersonic speeds, commanding naval ships through treacherous waters, or leading ground troops with unflinching resolve, these women redefine bravery every day. Their contribution extends beyond combat as they reshape perceptions, demonstrating that leadership and valor are not confined to gender. Each time a woman officer salutes the national flag, she represents not just herself, but an entire generation of pioneers who have paved the way for equality in one of the most challenging and prestigious institutions in the country. In doing so, they inspire young girls across India to dream big, defy limitations, and believe that the uniform symbolizes not just strength but also possibility. These women are the living embodiment of India's motto, "Nari Shakti", demonstrating that true power comes from courage, skill, and a heart that beats for the nation. This transformation is a testament to the persistent efforts of women who have defied societal norms and challenged the traditional male-dominated military structures. Today, their contribution is critical to the operational success of defense forces across the globe.

II. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: WOMEN'S ENTRY INTO DEFENSE

1. Early Involvement: World War II and the Colonial Era

The first formal entry of women into India's defense forces dates back to World War II. Under British rule, women were inducted into various auxiliary services. In 1942, the Women's Auxiliary Corps (India) was formed, allowing women to serve in non-combatant roles such as clerks, typists, and telephone and telegraph operators. They were responsible for communication, administration, and logistics, providing critical support during the war.

Additionally, the Nursing Services were already operational during the British era, with the Military Nursing Service (MNS) continuing after India's independence in 1947. Indian women, however, were not permitted to serve in direct combat roles, a policy that would persist for many decades.

2. Post-Independence: Early Roles in Medical Services

After India gained independence in 1947, women's involvement in the country's defense forces continued primarily through the Military Nursing Service. Women served as nurses, providing support to the Indian Army during wars and military operations, but their roles were limited to medical fields.

In 1958, the Indian Army Medical Corps (IAMC) also began accepting women doctors. However, their participation was still confined to non-combat roles, and they were only allowed to serve in a professional medical capacity.

3. The Turning Point: 1990s – Opening of Non-Medical Roles

In 1992, the Indian government made a significant breakthrough by allowing women to be commissioned as officers in the Indian Army, Indian Navy, and Indian Air Force (IAF) under the Short Service Commission (SSC). This was a historic moment for the Indian Armed Forces, as it marked the first time women were inducted into non-medical roles such as logistics, administration, education, law, engineering, and intelligence.

However, these roles were limited to non-combat positions, and women were granted SSCs, meaning they could only serve for a limited period, typically 5-14 years, and were not eligible for permanent commission or higher leadership roles. Nevertheless, this step set the stage for further advancements.

4. Late 1990s and Early 2000s: Kargil War and Beyond

During the Kargil War of 1999, women played crucial roles in logistics, support services, and medical care, even though they were not on the frontlines. The war underscored the significance of women's contributions to the military and demonstrated their capability to serve under challenging circumstances.

In the subsequent years, the Indian Navy permitted women to serve on certain non-combat ships. Concurrently, the Indian Air Force started inducting women into more technical roles, such as air traffic control and aviation engineering.

5. 2010s: Women in Combat Support Roles and Flying High

In the 2010s, there were significant advancements in the inclusion of women in more active roles, particularly in the Indian Air Force. In 2015, the Indian government made a groundbreaking decision to allow women to serve as fighter pilots, making India one of the few countries in the world to do so.

In 2016, Flying Officers Avani Chaturvedi, Bhawana Kanth, and Mohana Singh became India's first women fighter pilots, marking a new era of gender inclusivity in the IAF. This represented a major shift towards accepting women in combat roles, particularly in the Air Force, where physical endurance and piloting skills are valued over traditional ideas of combat strength.

6. Supreme Court Rulings: Permanent Commission for Women (2020)

In 2020, the Supreme Court of India made a landmark decision granting women officers the Permanent Commission (PC) in the Indian Army. Prior to this ruling, women were only eligible for short service commissions, which limited their ability to advance to leadership roles or serve for an extended period. The Supreme Court's verdict mandated that women officers in non-combat roles should have the same rights as their male counterparts, allowing them to serve for a full career of up to 20 years, become eligible for promotions, and assume command positions. This ruling was not only a triumph for gender equality in the military but also a significant step toward breaking down institutional barriers that had hindered women from progressing to higher ranks.

7. National Defence Academy (NDA) Opens to Women (2021)

In 2021, a significant milestone was reached when the government permitted women to enroll in the National Defence Academy (NDA), India's leading military training institution which had previously been exclusively for men. The NDA serves as the gateway for permanent commission officers in the Army, Navy, and Air Force. This decision represented a crucial stride towards gender equality in the military, enabling women to undergo the same training as their male counterparts right from the beginning of their military careers. It also opened the door for women to be appointed to combat roles in the future, as the NDA equips officers for a wide range of military responsibilities.

8. Women in the Artillery Corps (2022)

In 2022, the Indian Army announced that women would be inducted into the Artillery Corps, one of the most important combat arms of the Army. This decision was historic as it marked the entry of women into combat arms in the Army - a move that had long been resisted due to concerns over physical standards and the combat-readiness of mixed-gender units. With this decision, women now have opportunities to serve in direct combat roles, moving beyond supportive functions.

9. Women in UN Peacekeeping Missions

In 2007, India made history by deploying the first all-female Formed Police Unit for UN peacekeeping in Liberia. These women have played crucial roles in restoring order and providing security in conflict zones, demonstrating India's dedication to global peace and security.

III. CURRENT PARTICIPATION: A GLOBAL SNAPSHOT

In the present day, women are fulfilling a wide range of roles across military branches in numerous nations. The Scandinavian countries, particularly Norway and Sweden, have been pioneers in the process of integrating women into their defense forces, where they are now actively serving in combat roles and occupying leadership positions. The decision made by the United States in 2015 to open all combat roles to women marked a momentous milestone in military history. Similarly, in countries like India, the UK, Israel, and Canada, women have made significant contributions in combat units, air squadrons, and naval ships.

However, the journey towards achieving complete integration is still ongoing. While some nations have taken bold steps towards inclusivity, others are facing reluctance. Cultural, religious, and societal barriers continue to pose obstacles to the participation of women in the defense forces of certain countries. In certain instances, the acceptance of women in combat roles is perceived as a challenge to traditional gender roles.

Despite reaching significant milestones, women in the Indian Armed Forces still encounter systemic challenges. The reluctance to open certain combat roles to women, prevailing gender biases, and societal perceptions of women's roles in the military reflect the complexities of achieving true equality. Nevertheless, the remarkable achievements of Indian women in defense — from piloting fighter jets to leading peacekeeping missions — undeniably showcase their capability and resilience.

As India works towards modernizing its military, the role of women in shaping the future of the country's defense forces cannot be overlooked. Their increasing presence not only enhances operational capabilities but also sets a powerful example of diversity and inclusion in an institution traditionally resistant to change.

Current participation of women in defence forces. It has increased almost three-fold over the last six years, with more avenues being opened to them at a steady pace.

There are 9,118 women currently serving the army, navy and air force.

According to 2019 figures, women comprise only 3.8% of the world's second-largest army - compared to 13% of the air force and 6% of the navy.

IV. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN INDIAN DEFENSE FORCES

Despite these historic advancements, women in India's defense forces continue to face several challenges that hinder full integration and equal participation. These challenges stem from societal attitudes, institutional biases, and structural barriers.

Combat Exclusion and Limited Roles While women have been inducted into several branches of the Indian Armed Forces, combat roles in the Infantry, Armored Corps, and Special Forces of the Army are still largely off-limits. This exclusion reflects a broader global debate on whether women should be placed in roles that require direct physical combat. While countries like the U.S., Israel, and the UK have opened combat roles to women, India remains cautious, with concerns over physical standards, unit cohesion, and the impact on combat readiness.

Physical Fitness Standards and Gender Bias One of the most contentious challenges women face is the question of physical fitness standards. Many believe that the physical demands of combat roles may disadvantage women. However, this perception often ignores the fact that modern warfare relies heavily on technology and strategic skills, areas where women can contribute equally. The belief that women are "physically weaker" than men often fuels resistance to their full integration, despite evidence of women successfully handling demanding roles such as fighter pilots and engineers.

Cultural and Societal Barriers Deep-rooted societal and cultural norms in India still view the military as a male domain. Patriarchal attitudes often reinforce the idea that women should not be involved in military combat. This mindset is not only prevalent among sections of society but also within the defense establishment. Many senior officers are often hesitant to see women in leadership or combat roles due to traditional gender roles.

Sexual Harassment and Gender Discrimination Sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination remain serious concerns for women in India's defense forces. The military's rigid, hierarchical structure can make it difficult for women to report instances of harassment or assault without fear of retaliation or career damage. While policies and grievance mechanisms have been put in place, the issue persists, requiring deeper institutional reforms and stricter enforcement of safeguards.

Promotions and Career Advancement Until the 2020 Supreme Court ruling, women in the Indian Army were only offered short service commissions, which limited their tenure to a maximum of 14 years. As a result, women were often ineligible for higher ranks and command positions, which require longer service periods. The lack of permanent commission status denied them the opportunity to rise to decision-making roles, limiting their influence within the military hierarchy. While this has now been rectified for many branches, the Indian Navy and some sections of the Army continue to present roadblocks to equal career progression.

Perception of Leadership Abilities Despite the legal victories, there is still a perception that women are less capable leaders in the military. This often stems from entrenched gender biases within the institution. Women who command units or lead teams frequently face scrutiny, with their decisions sometimes questioned more than those of their male counterparts

V. CONCLUSION

The journey of women in defense forces is one of resilience, perseverance, and triumph over adversity. While challenges remain, the trajectory is clear: women are an indispensable part of modern defense forces. As barriers continue to fall, the future promises an increasingly inclusive and equitable military where women stand shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts, contributing to the safety, security, and defense of their nations.

Each milestone, whether it be the induction of women fighter pilots or the Supreme Court ruling granting permanent commission, represents not only a victory for the women who dared to challenge the status quo but also for the nation, which is steadily recognizing that the strength of its military is not determined by gender, but by skill, commitment, and leadership.

Yet, the road to full gender parity in the Indian Armed Forces is far from complete. Despite the undeniable progress, deep-seated challenges persist, from restricted access to frontline combat roles to the cultural biases that still view the military as a male-dominated domain. Women, though proving their competence in every role they have been allowed to assume, continue to face institutional and societal obstacles that question their capabilities and leadership potential.

However, the integration of women into India's defense forces is not just a matter of fairness; it is a strategic necessity for a modern and effective military. In a world where warfare is increasingly driven by technology, intelligence, and precision, women are poised to play a critical role in shaping the future of defense. Their inclusion brings diversity of thought, leadership styles, and operational efficiency, all of which are essential in the evolving landscape of defense and security.

The Indian Armed Forces stand at a pivotal moment in their history. The decisions made today regarding the full inclusion of women in all aspects of military service will not only determine the future of gender equality in the armed forces but also the strength, versatility, and readiness of India's military in the face of global challenges. By embracing women as equal contributors and leaders, the defense forces are not just empowering women but are also fortifying the nation's security apparatus.

The courage, dedication, and professionalism displayed by women in India's defense forces continue to inspire a new generation of young girls and women across the country, sending a powerful message: that the uniform, and the honor of serving the nation, belongs to all who are willing to earn it. The future of India's defense forces is undeniably intertwined with the future of women in its ranks, and with every step forward, they are not just making history—they are shaping the destiny of a more inclusive and formidable military force for the generations to come.

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