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WOMEN-EMPOWERMENT AND THE INDIAN ARMY: AN EXPLORATION

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According to Endalcachew Bayeh, ‘women’s empowerment’ makes women ready ‘to make life-determining decisions’ (38). It is a significant observation because the very term ‘women’s empowerment’ *accepts* the fact that women are constantly dominated in patriarchal societies. Due to constant efforts undertaken by women and feminists alike, the socio-cultural-economic conditions of women in the 21st century are far better than what they were even in mid-20th. Presently, these so-called ‘liberated’ women can easily take important decisions for themselves, including volunteering for careers in military forces.

The present essay proposes to briefly focus on the so-called ‘empowerment’ of Indian women *vis-à-vis* their participation in the Indian Army. If Brian Christens writes that women’s empowerment is best possible when the females are offered spaces to collaborate with one another, and when they are exposed to various conflicts (Christens, 2010, p. 886-900), one has to agree that participation in the (Indian) military-profession could, arguably, be one of the better ways for achieving ‘empowerment of Indian women’.

Though many essays are being presently written about various issues related to and aspects of the female participation in the Indian military forces, it might be recalled that the socio-cultural projection of Indian women in combat-roles is nothing new. Since the Vedic period, women have voluntarily associated themselves with war – in responsible military-roles. *The Rig Veda* (c. 1500 B.C.) mentions the participation of Viśpālā in different battles (during which she also suffers a leg-injury). In 2017, Saiswaroop Iyer commemorated the earliest Indian female combatant in *Avishi: Warrior Queen from the Rig Veda*. The ancient Indian mythology regularly projects single female-combatants (and goddesses) like Doorga, Chandi, Kali, and Jagatdhatri, among others. An ancient Sanskrit hymn, beginning “Nijabhujadanda nipatitakhanda/ Vipatitamunda bhataadhipate...”, focuses on how Goddess Doorga cuts the inimical-forces into pieces with her weapons, while another – “Gadgini, Soolni, Ghora, Gadhini, Chakrini, Thadha, / Sankhini, Chapini, bhanabhoosundi, parigayudha” (in translation: ‘You are one with sword, you are one with spear, you are one who carries a head in one hand, you are one with mace, you are one with a wheel, you are one with a conch, you are one with a bow and similarly you are one with arrow, with shield and with Bhoosundi’) – refers to the Devi’s war-readiness and weapons. The ancient epics of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are also consistent in focusing on the female-warriors.

Anant S. Altekar writes that the early historical accounts of female-combatants in the Indian subcontinent (c. 2nd-century B.C. and 1st-century B.C.) – other than limited references to the 5th century B.C.-empress

Mrgāvatī (of Prayagraj) – were that of the military-commander Nayanika of the *Satavahana Empire* (of modern days' Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) (and Empress Anula of Anuradhapura, in northern Sri Lanka, who ruled from 47 B.C. to 42 B.C.) (Altekar, 1956, p. 187). Queen Rudrama Devi (who ruled modern days' Andhra Pradesh and Telangana between 1262 and 1289), Queen Karnavati Sisodia (c. 1495-1534) of eastern Rajasthan, Queen Durgavati Shah (1524-64) of (modern days') Madhya Pradesh, Queen Abbakka Chowta (1525-70) of Karnataka, Queen Chennamma Nayaka (c. 1647-96) of Karnataka, Queen Bhavaśaṅkarī Raymukhuti (17th-century) of Hoogly (in southern West Bengal), Queen Chennamma Desai (1778-1829) of north-western Karnataka, Queen Lakshmibai Rao Newalkar (1828-58) of Jhansi (Uttar Pradesh), and Queen Avantibai Lodhi (1831-58) of Ramgarh (Madhya Pradesh) have had distinguished themselves at various times through their remarkable military-roles. These women were valorous warriors who fiercely and mercilessly annihilated their enemies. The war-participation of non-royal women like the mid-18th-century Onake Obavva Holaya (who is said to have had single-handedly killed approximately 100 soldiers of Hyder Ali's forces at Chitradurga, Hyderabad), the *Sepoy Mutiny*-sniper Uda Devi Pasi (1830-57), Jhalkari Singh (1830-58), and Mahaviri Bhangi (d. 1857) of Muzaffarnagar are also worth-mentionable.

However, in spite of the courage, ferocity, and sacrifices of these women, Indian women have been traditionally dominated and neglected. Even in 2021-22 – on the scale of *Gender Inequality Index (G.I.I.)* – India ranks 122nd out of 191 countries¹, while as per the *Global Gender Gap Index (G.G.G.I.)*, India ranks 135th out of 146 countries². A *National Crime Records Bureau*-survey conducted in the first decade of the 21st-century discovered that in India, a woman is sexually abused every 3 minutes, while, in every 29 minutes, at least 1 woman is raped. A dowry-death occurs every 77 minutes, and in every 9 minutes, one Indian woman is tortured by her husband, boy-friend, or relative (Naidu and Yadav, 2007, p. 38). Moreover, as per a *U.N.I.C.E.F.*-report of 2019, 40 percent of world child marriages still occur in India (*United Nations Children's Fund*, 2019, p. 4-26). Hence, it could be observed that the option of joining the military forces is a sure indication of women-empowerment in India.

Though, in Independent-India, the Indian Army first began to recruit women permanently from November 1958 onwards, it should be mentioned that – in the modern sense of what could be referred to as the 'army of Indian women' – King Mirza Wajid Ali Shah (1822-87) and his Queen Hazrat Mahal (c. 1820-79) of Uttar Pradesh had first inaugurated a contingent of female-warriors as part of their forces. India, at that time, was overwhelmingly involved in its *First War of Independence* (the so-called 'Sepoy Mutiny', 1857).

The participation of women in the military – once again, in the modern sense of the term – began internationally in 1914: with the large-scale participation of women in the United States Army (though – mostly – in non-combatant-roles). A year later, Russia became the first country to 'empower' a woman to command an entire military-regiment (Alexandra Kudasheva, 1873-1921, of Central Russia).

However, Subhas Chandra Bose (1897 - ?) could be credited with creating the world's first *all-female regiment* (the 1000-volunteer-strong-*Rani of Jhansi Regiment* of the *Indian National Army*, which operated between October 1943 and May 1945)³. Vera Hildebrand, in *Women at War*, agrees that 'the creation of an Indian all-female regiment of combat soldiers was a radical military innovation in 1943' (Hildebrand, 2016, p. 3). It needs to be mentioned that because the successive (post-independence) Indian governments have curiously refused to 'recognise the *I.N.A.* as a formal freedom-fighting-force', the *Rani of Jhansi Regiment* did not and could not garner the deserved publicity and attention. Naturally, in the 'Preface' to *Women against the Raj*, Joyce C. Lebra, exasperatedly, writes, "Despite the plethora of books on [Subhas Chandra] Bose and the *I.N.A.*, scant mention of the *Rani of Jhansi Regiment* is found in these volumes, typically not even a mention. Studies by Leonard Gordon and Peter Fay are two exceptions that do contain passages on the *Regiment*" (Lebra, 2008, p. xiii).

During the Second World War, around 0.2 million women directly served as combatants (except the Russian women)⁴, while, in Russia, the number of female combatants was 0.8 million between 1943 and 1945 (Sakaida, 2003, p. 3). However, in most cases, most of these women were amply supplied with arms, ammunition, and food. In stark contrast, the ‘empowered’ women of Bose’s *Rani of Jhansi Regiment* had to fight against every odd possible just to prove their spirit of soldier-ship and dedication. Nevertheless, Bose’s impassioned address to the women of the *Indian Independence League* on 12 July 1943 – that they, by taking up guns, would empower themselves and rejuvenate the freedom-loving Indians, was replied to by hundreds of expatriate Indian women who immediately joined the I.N.A. (see Bharadwaj, 1994, p. 73-76).

Probably having been inspired by the I.N.A.-strategies, the Indian Army – as if in a bid to ‘empower’ women – began to consider their option of joining the Army as officers from the closing decade of the 20th-century, and, on 21 September 1992, Priya Jhingan became the first Indian woman to be formally inducted into the Indian Army as an officer⁵.

One hundred and four years before this ‘event’, the imperial army of England in India (which had a considerable number of Indian-presence) inaugurated the (*British*) *Indian Military Nursing Services* (I.M.N.S.), where the Indian women could join, but only as military-nurses. As the First (1914-18) and Second World War (1939-45) reached their respective decisive phases, more and more Indian (female) military nurses volunteered (out of whom over three hundred and fifty became war-casualties). Other than recruiting Indian women for Allied Forces’ Secret Services, the Allies (especially the English) founded the (*Indian*) *Women’s Auxiliary Corps* (W.A.C.) in May 1942, where more than 11,500 women (mostly of Indian descent) joined, and, later, served in semi-combatant-roles (Perry, 1990, p. 1114).

What is worth-mentionable here (though it is an area of concern) is that even after the passage of 75 years since the Indian independence, the Indian Army still does not permit women to enrol themselves for combatant-roles in several of its sub-branches (though the Indian Air Force and the Indian Navy recruit women as combatants). Understandably, the number of international publications focusing on the role and participation of women in Indian Army (and in other allied branches) are also quite limited. Those existing include Deepanjali Bakshi’s *In the Line of Fire: Women in the Indian Armed Forces* (2006), Sajita Nair’s *She’s a Jolly Good Fellow* (2012), Gunjan Saxena’s *The Kargil Girl: An Autobiography* (2020), Maya Chandrasekaran and Meera Naidu’s *Cadet No. 1, and other amazing Women in the Armed Forces* (2021), Swapnil Pandey’s *The Force Behind the Forces: Stories of brave Indian Army Wives* (2021), and Kush Kalra’s *Indian Territorial Army and Women* (2022). So, though one can agree with the generalised observation that the recruitment of women in Indian Army empowers them, it is also contestable whether the ‘empowerment’ is ‘complete’ at all.

It is, however, to be mentioned that numbers of female soldiers and officers are gradually increasing in the Indian Army. In the recent years, the Army is easily rules and regulations for the entry of women, and is desperately trying to cope up with the scarcity of female soldiers. The international statistics show that the numbers of women are worth mentionable in different armies of the world, and India needs to keep this statistical data in mind if its Army is really bent on empowering its women. For example, the U.S. Army presently employs 0.23 million women on active duty, and 0.17 as reserve personnel⁶. 16,680 women, presently, are serving the U.K. Regular forces⁷, while the number of women in the Russian Army is approximately 0.16 million⁸, and in the French forces, 11 percent of the Army is composed of women, 16 percent of the Navy, and 28 percent of the French Air Force⁹. 22,500 women are presently serving the German Bundeswehr¹⁰, while 6.1 percent of Japanese Military is composed of women¹¹. The number of women serving the North Korean troops is 0.38 million¹²; in China, it is 53,000¹³; in Pakistan, between 3,400 and 4,000¹⁴, and in South Korea, 7,000¹⁵.

It may not be, therefore, erroneous and an exaggeration to observe that women empowerment is continuing in varied paces around the world – as far as the female recruitment in armies is concerned. When statistics reveal that only 3 percent (36,000) of the Indian Army (presently, the world's largest volunteer force) is composed of women, it certainly calls for attention and immediate redressal.

It is not that the Indian Army has a 'reputation' for being anti-feminist. It has, in contrast, an obtrusive concern for its servicemen. Women have also been given respectable and special places time and again. For example, its officers are overwhelmingly sympathetic to the causes and demands of the members of the *(Indian) War Widows Association (W.W.A.)*, which was established in 1972 (presently, there are approximately 14,500 war-widows in India¹⁶).

However, when it comes to the question of empowering the Indian women by inducting them into the Army, a caution is being visibly maintained. Nevertheless, the Indian Army is taking positive steps towards including women in its combat-branches (though much remains to be done), but it is also an area of grave concern that the matriarchal Indian society of earlier times (where women easily and naturally took part in war) should pass into a chauvinistic and patriarchal environment where even a woman's combat-readiness has to be measured and sanctioned by her male counterparts. In this 21st century, it is high time that women should not be 'empowered', but – like Doorga, Kali, and Jagatdhatri – should be viewed and respected as 'powerful women who have the capacity to annihilate enemies without any external assistance'. Where we are today is undoubtedly a long distance away – and downhill – from the 'empowered' women described in the Indian epics and ancient/medieval Indian history who could choose their own husbands and killed their enemies.

Different statistics available from newspaper-articles and research papers demonstrate that in the second and third decades of the 21st century, the number of women in the Indian Armed Forces is increasing at a slow but steady pace. This attests to the concept of gradual 'empowerment of Indian women through active services'. However, women's involvement with, and in, the Indian Army is still an area of concern.

Wangchu Lama and Salvin Paul have forwarded a very thoughtful observation regarding how the empowerment of Indian women is possible through their induction in the Armed Forces. They write,

"Upliftment of women has been the pertinent aim of almost every nation in the current era. The development of any nation is undoubtedly linked to gender parity. [...] Since the past decades, women have come a long way not only in the military sectors but in other sectors such as politics and business as well. Women have reached great heights in almost all fields which were otherwise male-centric. Women have been undoubtedly on par with their male counterparts. Indian Government has been putting all efforts to uplift women in the society for the development of the nation as a whole. The process of training women has started from the very roots of the armed forces. Admission of girls in *Sainik Schools* that train future defence officers, which was initially meant only for boys is evident in the endeavour of government in achieving gender parity enshrined in the constitution of India. Women's participation in the Indian Armed Forces has changed drastically in number on a positive note, though there are still huge differences compared to their male counterparts. Although women have now been given permanent commission in the armed forces by the Supreme Court, combat roles are still closed for them. However, there is still a long way to go in achieving equality in the sector in a patriarchal society. There is a need for more policies and frameworks for the induction of women in combat roles as well as an equal number of recruitment of women in the Forces to achieve the equality enshrined in the Constitution of India" (Lama and Paul, 2020, p. 1157).

Lama and Paul's observations and suggestions would definitely give food for thought to the Indian government and the Indian Army, and help them formulate new ideas regarding female empowerment. Nevertheless, as per the present post-doctoral fellow's perspective, the Indian Army's opening up to women-officers, and considering giving them permission to engage themselves in combat-roles, is definitely a remarkable step towards women's empowerment.

Notes

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