

EXAMINING THE FIRST-EVER WOMEN'S MILITARY PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

There has been an overall rise in the presence of women in the armed forces of countries. A close look at the Indian Armed Forces reveals a gradual change in the nature and scope of women's military participation clearly reflecting the growing role of women in security and nation building. Research and scholarship exploring and examining their earliest military presence is needed to understand the genesis of Women's Military Participation(WMP) in India. Women's Auxiliary Corps (India), WAC(I) though considered a colonial relic, is a treasure trove of information that can illuminate critical developments shaping and affecting women's agency of power. Indian women in WAC(I) were participating in a general, technical and non-medical role for the first time in the military, regarded as a non-traditional occupation. Women's military participation in WAC(I) deserves a critical feminist analysis for unraveling the state's instrumentalist and patriarchal approach while gaining a contextual understanding of the landmark development.

KEYWORDS: *Women's Military Participation in India, feminist, colonial, WAC(I), non-traditional occupation, patriarchy, power, state, empowerment*

INTRODUCTION

Women in India have witnessed dynasty battles, empire strikes, colonial conquests, territorial wars, wars at sea, conflicts and struggles of independence, etc. Not always was she a victim or a bystander, but also an integral part of the military action involved. Indian History is replete with examples of women warriors who have planned and led cavalry, infantry, armies and even fleets to fight the enemy. In the context of a growing national consciousness towards women's empowerment, it is imperative that we examine the presence and participation of women in the most masculine of all organizations, namely the Military in non-medical/nursing roles, also termed as a 'non-traditional occupation' for women (Williams, C. L. 1989).

The 21st century has delivered many landmark developments for women in the armed forces. A 100 all-women battalion has been commissioned into Assam Rifles stationed in the north-east region (PTI, 2018). The Indian Army also inducted women *jawans* in its Corps of Military Police(CMP) (Express News Service, 2021). The Indian Air Force trained and inducted the first batch of fighter pilots from amongst its women officers (PTI, 2022). The Indian Navy trained and sent an all-woman crew comprising six women officers to successfully circumnavigate the globe, the first-of-its-kind endeavor in India. It also trained and inducted women as Maritime Reconnaissance (MR) pilots and observers onboard helicopters (Indian Navy, 2020). The Indian Navy will soon be enlisting women sailors through the Agnipath scheme engaging them in PBOR roles

(Bishnoi, 2022). In addition, women officers from the logistics and medical branch have been deployed on frontline ships (Singh, 2021). These changes are groundbreaking achievements from both gender and military perspectives. Military roles and practices that stereotype gender or practices are being opened for women and women are proving their competence paving the way for others. However, Indian Women's military history is not a post-independence phenomenon. And that is precisely why this article is imperative. India has a forgotten history of Indian women serving in diverse military roles.

The first formal participation of Indian women in the modern military was in WAC(I), Women's Auxiliary Corps India and WRINS, Women's Royal Indian Naval Service. Indian women plunged into formal military service during WWII. Bakshi(2006) in 'In the Line of Fire: Women in the Indian Armed Forces' discusses the formation of Women's Auxiliary Corps (India) or WAC (I) in May 1942 by the British, for female volunteers to contribute to the war cause; it also was the only time they could serve in non-medical roles.

The core personnel of WAC (I) were to work with the Army and Air Force in India. Harfield (2005) in his historical research on the corps has written about the age of the candidate and composition of the corps. Candidates 'between the ages of 18 (later changed to 17 due to acute shortage)- to 50 years of age with a sound knowledge of written and spoken English' were invited to enlist in the WAC(I). Service in the corps was for the duration of the war and open to all, thus setting a predetermined

composition of the intake. A 1945 published report recorded the ratio of intake where out of every 8 auxiliaries; 1 is European, 3 are Anglo-Indian, 3 are Indian-Christian and only 1 is a non-Indian Christian. Indian Women were granted concessions pertaining to clothing, footwear and headdress regulations.

Women recruits after six months of training were selected for officer training and commissioning. The trades employed by the Army and the Air Force included skills like Aircraft plotter, Radio Mechanic 1st and 2nd grade, Clerk(general duties), Draughtswoman 1st and 2nd grade, Driver(Mechanic), Driver(Motor Ambulance), Operator Special, Operator Switchboard, Storewoman (RAOC) 1st and 2nd grade, Storewoman(Hospital and other units), Mess Sergeant in Reinforcement Camps and similar units. A cleaning allowance was given to all auxiliaries while an additional allowance was paid for any extra duty eg. clerks working as stenographers. Pay structure was between Rs. 65 per month to Rs. 125 per month based on ability and successful trade tests and for officers could go up to Rs 300 or more per month.

The strength of the corps in February 1944 was recorded as 678 officers and 7115 auxiliaries. Due to the increased demand of clerical staff, the naval wing of the WAC(I) was formed and was redesignated WRINS, Women's Royal Indian Naval Service in February 1945. Indian women were recruited as clerks, cipher operators, photographers and in the naval intelligence department. The department or corps that was amply benefitted by the WAC(I) was the Signal Corps. The static signal units of the corps were facing acute shortage due to exodus of male personnel. Indian women personnel of WAC(I) were employed as clerks and operators for manual telephone switchboards, teleprinters and wireless sets.

WAC(I) was in reality, a replacement program aimed at continuing the allied war effort by the British administration and military. The authority for such replacement in a unit of male personnel, British or Indian by women, was at a scale of four women to three male (4:3). However, women worked side-by-side with male tradesmen working the same shift patterns over a 24-hour working day (Harfield, A. 2005, 251). In view of this emergency call to women who filled up vacancies left by men, the WAC(I) was considered an 'extra regimentally employed' category. Harfield describes how women in WAC(I) were employed in signals – vital work of communications, as cipher operators in censor work – vital for keeping information from enemy's ears, in intelligence work of highly confidential nature, ordnance branch handling supply and stores of enormous scale, educational, legal branch, in vegetable production and as photographers and mess caterers.

When the war ended, WAC (I) personnel were entitled to a pre-release Army Education scheme where they were eligible for exams like the Indian Army Special Certificate

(equivalent to matriculation) and the Indian Army English Certificate along with instructional courses on commercial and domestic science, household management, typing, bookkeeping etc. The corps was disbanded in August 1947 after just five years and five months of its inception, in which time it had provided exceptional contribution to all the three services.

VIEWS AND DISCUSSION

The British administration and military were keen to push the war effort in their colonies. There is enough scholarship (including the battle honors) to elaborate on the role played by Indian soldiers in pursuit of imperial ambitions of the Crown, WWI and WWII. The US brought out the first-ever legislation for women's military participation in the wake of a shortage of manpower during WWII. Washington and London invoked its women to join the force to free a man to fight and win the war. Posters inviting women volunteers to aid in the war effort evidently depict the change in the patriarchal policies that disallowed women to serve in the military in the first place.

Indian women who had received western education in pre-independent India were no less than colonial assets in the allied war effort. In the same way as western educated upper caste Indians turned out to be effective civil servants serving the colonial powers administering Indian affairs; harnessing the educated Indian women's potential in military service was a pragmatic policy rather than a change of patriarchal mindset.

An important question is about the identity of the Indian women who were part of WAC(I). It has been established that (Valentina Vitali 2019) majority of the WRINS were Indian women. The presence of diversity of Indian women in WAC(I) is a matter of doubt. Since western education was not accessible to all, women belonging to diverse backgrounds including religion, caste, socioeconomic status etc. may not have been able to volunteer and enroll for military service.

The WAC(I) was an instrumentalist approach, typical of war strategies of the time which employed and used women in times of crisis and discarded them post-crisis. Notwithstanding, the Indian women of WAC(I) were women standing at the crossroads of colonial and postcolonial world. One can surmise from the national developments between 1942-1945; they had fewer chances of employment in India. A society entrenched with sex and caste based practices like Sati, Child Marriage, Dowry etc; military employment offered the Indian women once-in-lifetime opportunity to train in elite organization, train, earn and learn skills, work with men and women, conduct technical duties, critical assignments and interactions, etc.

'Women in Military' in pre-independent India was a milestone for two reasons. One it created the idea of the new, educated, postcolonial Indian women ready to play their role in nation building. And two; it set a new discourse on women's

military participation in non-traditional branches'. Unfortunately, both narratives got lost in independence and India ushered into a new era with a military which prohibited women.

Women in a military occupation entailed conduct of such duties and assignments that involved weapons, machines, codes, training and working with foreign men etc. For any Indian living at the time, this definitely did not fit a 'traditional occupation' for the Indian Woman. The question is whether the western educated Indian women had an advantage due to their education and caste. An in-depth investigation into the identities and cultural backgrounds of Indian women who were part of the WAAC(I) and WRINS will be critical for a nuanced understanding of their first-ever formal military participation. The sociocultural and economic profile of the pioneering women military professionals will reveal other key themes including women as a labour force, women as breadwinners, concept of working women in non-traditional workplaces, beginning of militarist feminism in India, etc.

CONCLUSION

WAC(I), the first-ever women's military participation in India may have had a marginal presence of Indian women; however it was clearly in its nature and scope of participation one of the most empowering moments in the history of Indian women. Notwithstanding the colonial background, the military employment and service served as an agency of power for the many young women living in a traditional society. Emoluments, allowances and educational qualifications exposed women to some degree of economic independence and social parity.

Military is a symbol of power and women in the military challenge patriarchy and their power hegemony. The examination of WAC(I) from a critical feminist lens is a great way to understand the presence of women as a labourforce especially in a non-traditional occupation. It also reveals the patriarchal undercurrents at play in the role of state apparatus like the military in promoting empowerment of women. The weight of any program aimed at women's empowerment can be carried successfully if the dialectics between women and power is resolved. Women's role in the security and peace of society must be researched and respected.

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