

Soldiering Women: A Level Playing Field Requires "Massive Reforms", Is the Army Ready?

Lt. General Harcharanjit S. Panag (Retd) interviewed by Rita Manchanda

Abstract

Are we on the cusp of a gender revolution in the Indian military? Military women have been seen as 'intruders' and marginalised in the masculinised world of the armed forces, more showcased in photo opportunities than in operational roles, gender stereotyped and patronisingly pampered but excluded from decision making and career progression prospects. Three decades since the first women were inducted as officers in the non-medical streams of the armed forces, has the military system overcome gendered socio-cultural inhibitions? Are we seeing a transformation in the profile of state militaries worldwide in response to a more expanded understanding of what constitutes security? Digital technologies have transformed war fighting strategies. How does this impact the professional profile of the prototype 'masculine' soldier, and militarised masculinities? In a free-wheeling conversation with Rita Manchanda, Lieutenant General Harcharanjit Singh Panag (retd.) helps examine some of these issues.

Interviewee Profile

Lt. General Harcharanjit S. Panag PVSM, AVSM (Retd) Lt. General Harcharanjit S Panag (Retd) was commissioned on 21 December, 1968 into 4 Sikh regiment of the Indian Army. He is a veteran of the 1971 Indo Pak war and has also done a number of tenures in operational and counter insurgency areas. He held many prestigious instructional, staff and command appointments in his illustrious career spanning 40 years. He commanded a Combat Group and pioneered its induction into high altitude area of Eastern Ladakh. He also commanded an Armoured Brigade, a Mountain Brigade in high altitude, an Armoured Division and a Strike Corps. He was General Officer Commanding (in-Chief) of the Northern Command and the Central Command. After his retirement in December 2008, the General served as a Member of the Armed Forces Tribunal with the status of a High Court Judge until December 2013. An extremely well read and deeply intellectual professional, he pioneered far reaching doctrinal changes in the Indian Army and helped institutionalize them, including the adoption of Systems Approach to Training. The General is now a defence analyst and has contributed over 350 articles on strategic and military affairs in various newspapers, magazines and online news portals. He is a columnist for The Print since 2018. He has authored 'Indian Army - Reminiscences, Reforms and Romance' (New Delhi: Westland, 2020).

Interviewer Profile

Rita Manchanda is a writer, researcher, and human rights activist specializing in Women Peace and Security. She has over 15 years of experience as Senior Executive and Research Director with the regional NGO, South Asia Forum for Human Rights (SAFHR). Previously, she served as Gender Advisor to the Commonwealth Technical Fund and has consulted with UN Women, United Nations Development Programme, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogues, and Saferworld. She is the editor of the SAGE Series in Human Rights Audits of Peace Processes (2015) and author of Women and the Politics of Peace (2017), Women in the Naga Peace Process (2004), and Women War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency (2001).

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Introduction

Are we on the cusp of a gender revolution in the Indian military? Military women have been seen as ‘intruders’ and marginalised in the masculinised world of the armed forces, more showcased in photo opportunities than in operational roles, gender stereotyped and patronisingly pampered but excluded from decision making and career progression prospects. Three decades since the first women were inducted as officers in the non-medical streams of the armed forces, has the military system overcome gendered socio-cultural inhibitions? Defence Ministry policies have changed making way for equal terms of service, career advancement and command and combat roles in the armed forces. But the regularity with which serving women officers appeal to the Courts for equal opportunity redress is a reminder of the obstinacy of gender prejudices.

The year 2023 marks a red letter year for pushing back the glass ceiling with the army’s first woman medical officer deployed in a Siachin forward post, a woman commanding an air force combat squadron and another steering the navy’s fast attack craft/warship. Are we seeing a transformation in the profile of state militaries worldwide in response to a more expanded understanding of what constitutes security? More complex security politics especially in democracies requires a recasting of the military to respond to a broader spectrum of assignments including civil humanitarian tasks and domestic and international peacekeeping. Digital technologies have transformed war fighting strategies. How does this impact the professional profile of the prototype ‘masculine’ soldier, and militarised masculinities?

In a free-wheeling conversation, Lieutenant General Harcharanjit Singh Panag (Retd.) helps us examine some of these issues. After 40 years of distinguished service in the Army, including as General Officer Commanding (GOC) in Northern Command and Central Command, and post retirement as a Member of the Armed Forces Tribunal, Lt. Gen. Panag, today, is a known columnist on strategic affairs. He is known for his non-conformist views and is no stranger to controversies, especially on issues involving the army’s ethics and professionalism. His sharp analysis has made his column in the online portal *The Print* an important read, including articles such as “*Indian Military Must Let go of ‘Male Warrior’ Culture*” and “*Women in Armed Forces Touched New Heights but Real Battle has Just Begun*” (The Print 2023) which reveal his interest in the challenges of gender integration in the military.

Rita Manchanda (RM): Lt. Gen. Panag, Welcome to WISCOMP.

For outsiders to the institutional structure and culture of the armed forces, it seems curious that despite the Defense Ministry's policy announcements regarding career progression and promotion of women in the services, women officers regularly appeal to the Courts to get implemented equal opportunity policy decisions, whether on Permanent Commissions or Promotions. Why, is there this gap between government policy and armed forces' practice?

Lieutenant General H.S. Panag (Lt. Gen. Panag): The military, to begin with, brought women in as a kind of an appendage, to satisfy the general public outcry over the rights of women. That was in 1992. It has been 31 years since then. Expansion in women's participation has been at the very active intervention of the courts. Even that took 18 years. The struggle for parity began in 2003, with the petition in the Delhi High Court of Babita Puniya.¹ It was settled only in 2021². After 18 years, they overturned the discriminatory criteria for promotion. Now there is no discrimination left.

Within the armed forces, there still is resistance. There still is need for education of not only rank and file but of senior staff as well. It is not so far back when the Chief of Defense Staff, General Bipin Rawat in 2020 was reported as saying, we will have to keep them cocooned from the eyes of the soldiers. Commanding officers will be on long maternity leave. We are not ready to accept that. The soldiers are not ready to accept women as their commanders. The nation is not ready to see them coming back in body bags (Dutta 2018). If that was the view of a very enlightened soldier exposed to training courses in US academies, then you can imagine what a prejudicial mindset still prevails within the armed forces.

Legal hurdles have been removed, the Army has fallen in line. Incidentally, the government too supported the Army's line. The Army's case is not fought by the Army but by the Attorney General or Solicitor General of India. The legal fight is over, the question now is how fast the army can psychologically prepare for merit driven, full empowerment of women in the armed forces.

RM: Why have states, and specifically the Indian armed forces, abandoned policies of exclusion to promote gender integration. It faces no manpower constraints. What has changed in the operational environment of combat? Is it new war-fighting technologies?

¹ Babita Puniya, in 2003 filed a petition in Delhi HC seeking PC for female officers recruited through SSC. In 2010, the Court ruled in favor of granting PC. It was appealed. In February 2020, the SC directed the government to ensure that women SSOs are given a permanent commission in the Army, including command postings.

² Eighty-six petitioners in *Lt. Col. Nitisha & Ors v. Union of India & Ors.*, moved the Supreme Court against the Indian Army alleging gender-based discrimination. Supreme Court in 2021 held that the policies to grant PC for women officers in the Army constituted 'systemic discrimination'.

Lt. Gen. Panag: On the question of technology, the answer is both Yes and No. A lot of technology has come into play in the armed forces, and has transformed the classic war-scape. The classic close combat battle that we have romanticized based on Hollywood movies--of soldiers charging with bayonets, soldiers dying on the way, the heroic reaching of the objective and finally planting the flag after a grim struggle--revolves around physical effort and endurance. The presumption was that it would not be possible for women to do the same. The classic bayonet or hand-to-hand fight has not been there for at least 50 to 60 years. Modern weapons have changed war. In the visuals of the Ukraine war, there are drones, there are strikes and suddenly a ship is blown up. Artillery is used, but few visuals of the kind of combat derived from the romanticized version of physical attack being decisive.

In our context, the modern technological battlefield, is a decade or two away. But the battlefield is less physical now. It opens up a lot of scope for women's deployment on merit. You only have to see the control room of ISRO when Chandrayaan landed on the moon, to be struck by the number of women in that room. That is the scope for women's participation that I am alluding to.

RM: Modern militaries especially in democracies are tasked with a broad spectrum of assignments. Is the repurposing of 'security' tasks, the inclusion of civil peacekeeping and humanitarian tasks resulting in greater political and operational willingness towards accommodating women? Could it produce a shift from the military's hyper-masculinity paradigm?

Lt. Gen. Panag: On the issue of deployment for internal security, we see forces deployed in Kashmir and Manipur. These were insurgency affected areas, and always there are leftovers of the insurgency. Countering insurgencies does involve a certain amount of work which is non-military in nature, but the majority of the work is military in nature. It is to create the environment for the local administration to take over. In the Indian armed forces, we have a million strong paramilitary, the Central Armed Police Forces including CRPF, BSF, ITBP, SSB and Assam Rifles. The strength of the Indian army deployed in civilian areas is just about nine lakhs (9,00,000). The paramilitary strength is one million. The government's decision to deploy the army, maybe because the paramilitary fails to rise to the complex security challenge, results in the army (which should be the last responder) becoming the first responder to the crisis. That is why you see the visibility of the army. Another likely reason is the people's faith in the institution of the army; that once the army comes, the violence will stop. The point is that if the paramilitary had the same reputation, the army would not be deployed on these occasions at all.

The argument about the 'repurposing' of the armed forces and its implications for the inclusion of women soldiers and the scope for a greater diversity of roles is more applicable to women in the paramilitary. In the CRPF and the BSF a lot of work involves interface with civilians. These forces are meant for internal security, controlling strife and disaster relief. The army is there for the

performance of specific tasks, but that task does not involve a specialized role for army women. Also, I believe, you are not going to see a lot of army deployment for quelling civil strife.

RM: Still on the question of the gender implications of the expansion and diversity of modern security challenges, let me draw your attention to the existent strategic literature, particularly about the role of female engagement teams (FTEs) in counterinsurgency and post insurgency situations. In the Indian context, for instance the encounter of the military with civilians, particularly women civilians in Kashmir and the Northeast has been a contentious issue. You have written on the damaging impact on the army's image (*The Print* Aug 17, 2023; July 6, 2023). Could a gender-integrated force obviate some of these harms?

Lt Gen. Panag: In international peacekeeping, it makes a lot of sense, because they (blue berets) are not there to enforce things by force. They are there to act as arbiters between two opposing sides, both of which have accepted their deployment. So it is a different issue altogether. Within the context of maintenance of internal security, let me tell you how the army is supposed to deal with the situational crisis of a mob. I believe you were alluding to what is happening in Manipur. The forces have had to counter a mass of bamboo wielding protestors and agitating Meira Paibis obstructing their operation (*The Print* July 7, 2023). Such situations have happened earlier in Kashmir. When the army is faced with the mob, there are no ifs and buts, the military shoots for effect. What the Army is doing in Manipur, getting into negotiations with the crowd is wrong. This is not the way the Army's charter has been written. In fact, it refers to civil authority as part of military law. It says that the military will not resort to police methods like firing in the air or wait for framing of charges and engage in negotiations. When the army is called into a situation, and you are confronted with a mob that is disrupting your mission, you will use force for effect.

So, how does the army handle itself in such situations. The army does this by involving the police in a combined action. The police deal with the mob, and the army holds itself aloof. When the situation warrants, the army will fight for enforcing calm. The argument (about FET) applies to the police and the CRPF. The local police must have a large number of women who can deal with protestors, especially if they resort to such protest tactics as the Meira Paibis taking off their clothes³. The incident was sensationalized by the media and used as a propaganda tool to embarrass the army.

I will say that if you (the armed forces) are getting involved into wrong practices as we are in Manipur, the credibility of the army will go down. When there is a million strong paramilitary and an equally large local police contingent, where is the need for the army to get involved? But if we are going to do it, then a woman officer instead of a male officer will make some difference.

³ In November 2004, in front of the headquarters of the Assam Rifles in historic Kangla Fort in Imphal, Manipur, 12 Meira Paibis stripped naked, and held up banners reading 'Indian army rape us/Indian army take our flesh.' Manipur Mothers have been in forefront of the campaign against militarization of Manipur state since 1990s and have focused attention on removing the draconian law AFSPA.

RM: An instrumental argument advanced for the inclusion of women soldiers is that they provide protection against gendered insecurity. Do you think the inclusion of women as well as the greater accommodation of feminine values would favorably impact ethics within the Army, particularly in tackling internal peacekeeping duties?

Lt. Gen. Panag: Frankly, the Army's peacekeeping duties are very small, and as per the Army's current norms, we fire for effect using minimum force. There is little scope for ethical ambiguity and ethically controversial action. Within the armed forces, I will grant that women are more ethical in their conduct and more diligent regarding obedience of orders. Also, women are less prone to corruption. Again, my experience is limited.

When I was in service, there were women who did try to shirk their duties. Following the December 2001 attack, when the army was mobilized between 2001-2002, I was commanding an armored division at the border. We had a good lady doctor, a fine athlete, and tough. She applied to return to the permanent base in Hisar, 500 kilometers away, so that she could be with her son who had come back from boarding school. Probably, this was the case with other officers elsewhere. When I was an army commander, I had instituted a practice of enabling direct communication with me. The few women officers under me who sought an interview, invariably would request me to intercede on behalf of their husbands. But all said and done, I have more faith in a woman compared to a man to remain steadfast.

RM: The initial decision in 1992 to induct women into the armed forces, as you have said, was a political one. What or who is driving the current policy of expansion and career progression of women? Although the Army is dragging its feet operationalizing it.

Lt. Gen. Panag: Both have been hand in glove in managing this ambivalence. The government must have given the initial direction about women's inclusion in the armed forces. You have to keep in mind that the government, the politicians are very concerned about public opinion. So, if there is some development (related to gender inclusion in the military), and it prompts a spate of articles or stories on television you will find that the government comes under pressure to respond. In 1992, when women were first inducted, around that time, there was a lot of media attention about the participation of women soldiers in the Gulf war. Some women, who were keen to join, picked up the issue, stirring a bit of a public debate in India. Following that, the government agreed to induct women into the forces, first in the military police, and in some of the paramilitary forces. The army too was told to include women. The military brought them in as officers on short service commission for five years.

The expectation was that after five years, they would go away. At the time, women's inclusion was not an overriding consideration for the political class. Now, women are empowered. Women

are no longer voting the way they did before, as a kind of family vote. Politicians are very conscious that women's voting preferences matter, and consequently their issues matter. It is a matter of time only before women come in a big way into all the Central Services. Women choose the army because it makes an impact. The public likes the army. The public is a part of the army. The public likes army news. Anything involving the army, gets a lot of attention?

RM: Women have been in the armed forces for 30 years, and their presence and career prospects are expanding. Would you say that gender integration in the armed forces is possible? Army women such as Capt. Deepanjali Bakshi writing in 2006 were critical about the structured marginalization of women in the institutional culture of the army (Bakshi 2006). Some five years later the influential strategic analyst Major Gen. Mrinal Suman (ret'd.) wrote that women are not treated fairly, they remain peripheral adjuncts and are not given scope to demonstrate their capabilities or intelligence (Suman 2010). He was not in favor of expanding women's roles nor their presence in the army. What has changed?

Lt. Gen. Panag: The real change has been ushered in by the Supreme Court judgment of 17 February 2020 making women SSC officers eligible to get Permanent Commission in the Army, which till now was granted to male officers only. Before that, after serving their 10 plus four years, they all used to go away. The 2020 judgment put everything on par, and opened the way for direct entry into the National Defense Academy. Until then, criticism about discrimination and marginalization of women in the forces is correct.

Of course, certain women did excel and many women performed well. But overall, not much attention was paid to them. The general attitude was that they were regarded as an unnecessary encumbrance and we had to cope with them. They were not given responsibilities related to their capabilities. They could do no (training) courses. It is only in the last few years, that a few women were given command appointments. Even here, women have not been given independent commands. They have been appointment 'Officer Commanding', and given command of smaller units. That discrepancy will gradually be settled as a larger number of women are approved for command appointments. But it will take another two decades before we reach the stage of what's happening in the US with 15 to 20 percent women in all ranks, and women about to reach the very top ranks. Even before women have reached the top in the armed forces, but only in the Army Medical Corps where women have been there since WWII, and in the Military Nursing Services since the Crimean war. By the time the Indian armed forces complete 100 years, we will have reached the same levels as the US relating to women's inclusion. But even they continue to face problems regarding full inclusion in their armed forces.

RM: Several social and psychological studies on women in the militaries of the US, UK and Canada reveal that even after long decades of full gender integration, the militaries remain an ill-fit for women who are viewed as intruders in a male bastion. Persisting are problems of sexual

violence, and deadly violence, in view of rising casualties of women supposedly in low risk combat situations. Is it the entrenched hyper masculinity of the culture of the military?

Lt. Gen. Panag: Absolutely, I agree. The ‘male warrior’ culture is omnipresent in society. It is a carry forward from the primitive days. Women were seen as an object of gratification, an object of procreation, and man the provider of the family. It will take a very long time for us to accept women as equals. It has taken so long in America. In India, women have led governments, but our courts, the guardians of the law and the law enforcers, even our political leaders in unguarded moments have been steeped in patriarchal prejudice. Gender discriminatory practices are evidenced in our families. The same prejudices are within the military too. Change will come, but gradually.

RM: When you talk about evolution within the military, we are talking about a very particular institution in which violence is very much constitutive of the military. If I may quote a passage from something that General Suman wrote in 2010. *“The environment of the military is highly non conducive, and rough for women, not only are our acceptance levels of women officers low, but there are fundamental questions [related to] the fact that this is an environment of violence and brutality, where you may be required to kill people, where there is social sanction for the deployment of violence. And this raises the real question of can women be usefully employed within the military?”* (Suman 2010)

Lt. Gen. Panag: I have read the General’s writings. I entirely disagree with his approach which reflects a romanticized vision of the operational environment of the army. When I was Northern Army Commander, I had 62 Rashtriya Rifle battalions serving in Jammu and Kashmir, and they were the mainstay of the counterinsurgency campaign. At the time, the number of terrorists operating were 1500. Annually we eliminated some 500 to 800. That would amount to some sort of an encounter every night. A Survey was conducted to calculate how many of the roughly 75,000 RR servicemen (62 battalions) had seen combat action, that is, how many had fired bullets, how many were close to being fired upon or been shot. The Survey revealed that of the soldiers who were supposed to be most intensely involved with counterterrorism just 10 to 15 percent had actually faced bullets.

In the past, there have been people who retired from the army without seeing a single day's combat. Even when we take 1962 war, when we lost a large chunk of territory, what were the army casualties? I think the number killed were about 5500 to 4000, and the wounded were roughly twice. Thrice that number survived-and went back to the Brahmaputra. In the modern war context, this envisioning of violence ridden combat environment is overplayed. In Ladakh, you are not in a battle every day. We had one skirmish in Galwan. Yes, there are rigors of service and in some sense that is because of the army's own doing. When soldiers are living in minus 30 degree

conditions, and do not have proper clothing, do not have proper food, then it's our fault. It's our government's fault.

This romanticized vision of physical combat prevails even within the military. Moreover, even if this scenario was the case, how different are the potential capabilities of our women from that of women soldiers in Ukraine and Russia who are seeing combat? How come some of the best snipers during WWII were women? A large number of women operated in Afghanistan? Were they sitting cocooned in barracks? Surely they saw combat? There have been casualties of women, involving gender specific combat units.

The military is not a man's world. Earlier, people used to say no wrestling for women, no boxing for women. So many sports were not open to women. Today, women are everywhere. And look at the standards. The standards of sportswomen in the world are better than some of the standards of our sportsmen in India.

RM: The cult of physical fitness has been fetishized, especially in the context of the America and Special Forces, and used to discriminate against women based on their lack of physiological capability. Would you say that that the emphasis on physical fitness is misplaced particularly in relation to diversity of modern security challenges?

Lt. Gen. Panag: It is an exaggerated kind of view. However, the nature of the job does involve a lot of physical work, and certain norms of fitness. Like, you have to be able to dig your own trenches, to put up a roof shelter to save yourself from shelling and so on. Machines can do this work, but they are not available in our army. Certain physical fitness standards have been specified within the Army. There are different standards for the combat arms, that is, the fighting arms. For other arms and services, the standard is lower. So if women want equal opportunities, it is now well accepted that there should be equal standards.

In the US, a lot of studies have been done around the gender differential in physical capability. A study from the Center for Military Readiness found that upper body strength of women is 40 to 50 percent lower, and they have 25 to 30 percent lower aerobic capacity than men. It is a physiological characteristic of the female. But then, even amongst males, we have varying standards of physical fitness --excellent, good and satisfactory. The satisfactory physical fitness standard is something that the best, let us say the above average woman would be able to achieve. When people caution and say women after marriage tend to let go and put on weight. This does happen. But then even most of our army officers tend to put on weight after seven, eight years of service.

When the US began recruiting women, they began with having very low standards, like we did in India in the beginning. The standards were so low that it was expected that even the women officers would object. I am talking of the 90s, when the early batches of women officer were inducted.

Until the time women started getting PC, we regarded them as an appendage, and thought it does not matter, let them walk rather than the requirement to run.

It was the same in the US army, with very low standards for women, till they suddenly realized that women were joining in large numbers and were in all ranks. So they went to the other extreme, they brought the standards on par with that of the men, ignoring gendered physiological difference. Subsequently, it became evident from the slipping performance of women that they could not pass the gender neutral standards, and their promotions and career prospects were getting affected. RAND Corporation was commissioned to find a way out of this conundrum. The study recommended introducing different standards for men and women, but a certain acceptable standard for women, so that in whatever armed service, and wherever they were deployed, they measured up to that. Otherwise, it would impinge upon organizational interests.

This is the situation in America, largely a meat eating country, where women have been much fitter and tougher than they are in India. Our rural people, our girls in all likelihood, are undernourished, and malnutrition is rampant. We have to accommodate this reality. A lot of scientific study within our armed forces is necessary to evolve acceptable physical standards. To sum up, there cannot be two standards. However, while the standards for women cannot be on par with that of men, there should be a minimum scientific standard for the kind of the work which women and men are required to do in a particular arm, in the particular service that they pick, and train for within the Army.

I would like to make an exception in the case of two arms which are involved in combat, the infantry, the mechanized infantry, and the people in the tanks, the Armored Corps. For these arms and the Special Forces, women must measure at least up to the satisfactory standard which is laid down for men. They should be able to do all the requisite tests. The setting of acceptable gender sensitive standards has been a problem for all armies, including the Israeli army since 1949, as conscription is universal for men and women there. Also, in the US where they have opened up the combat arms for women and allowed them to join the Commando brigade course, very few have been able to measure up to those exacting standards.

Within the armed forces, girls who can measure up must not be denied. Already the first woman has become a part of the Special Forces. She is from the Army Medical Corps and is deployed in an operational post in the Siachin glacier. More will follow. Scientific research is required within the country to determine acceptable standards to measure up to, for women and male officers who become physically unfit.

RM: What is your opinion about gender segregated units. Drawing upon a quantitative Survey of 55 women soldiers in the BSF, D.G. K. Ganesh stated that one of the reasons why women in the force were facing discrimination and marginalization was because of the organizational

practice of segregated units from training upwards. Consequently, women soldiers are never regarded as equal, but peripheral. Similarly, in an analysis of India's active UN Peacekeeping role, Klossek and Johansson Nogue (2021) argued that India's practice of advocating gender specific units and opposing joint or integrated ones, tended to reify gendered roles in peacekeeping. Women peacekeepers are deployed in civilian engagement tasks which require compassion and empathy, while men provide protective security cover.

Lt. Gen. Panag: UN peacekeeping is a specialized role and the system of gender specific units works well there. I am not too familiar with what is the experience of the CRPF and Border Security Force, but within the armed forces, gender specific units are out of question. It is not practical to have gender specific subunits at the company level. A company is about 120 men, a platoon is about 32 soldiers and the smallest grouping is 10 soldiers. So it is not really practical to have gender specific units. When there are more women. In any case, challenges of discipline will require a certain amount of segregation in the living spaces.

Women's presence in the ranks, could lead to a big improvement in the standard of the troops' upkeep of the barracks. In spite of the emphasis, the maintenance of toilets within the Army remains a big issue. Soldiers do not want to clean their own toilets. We are the only country, along with Pakistan, where we employ people dedicated for this kind of work. No other army has this kind of a trade - a washer man.

RM: One of your former colleagues, a fellow General supports the induction of women in the military as an evolutionary process, but is ambivalent about relying on a junior woman officer to get a man's job done. For instance, when he was a commanding officer, he had two officers available to lead a contingent of troops for emergency deployment to a remote site in a disturbed area by morning. He chose to send the male officer to get the job done. Are women officers then a liability in an operational situation?

Lt. Gen. Panag: This happens because we are not used to gender inclusion. Once you have a large number of women in the army, everyone will get an opportunity to prove their mettle. As for the commanding officer, the fact is we have very limited experience of women in the armed forces. Roughly speaking, the total number of women officers in the three services (excluding Medical/Dental Corps/Nursing) is close to 3967 (MoD 2023). Women officers were never put in operational field roles, but only in static administrative jobs. It is only now that women officers will begin in the Corps of Signals, Air Defense Artillery and Artillery. The Commanding Officer you spoke about could not have imagined these changes, nor had he been exposed to foreign armies like the US where women soldiers are deployed in multi-various roles.

RM: Not all accounts of women's experiences in foreign armies, including that of the US, have been positive. Some new studies about female engagement teams in Iraq and in Afghanistan

emphasize the deadly violence that was directed against them both by the 'enemy' as well as own colleagues.

Lt. Gen. Panag: At the same time, you saw that the military contractors who were at Abu Gharib and perpetrating atrocities on Iraqi prisoners, included women in the group. Women can be equally nasty in terms of the cruelty. This reminds me of the overwhelming emotionalism around the idea of women being taken prisoner. During the Iraq war when the first woman was captured and became a prisoner of war in 2003, media coverage was highly sensational. In India, there is this obsessive fear about Pakistanis taking women soldiers as prisoners. Firstly, all this talk of torture is exaggerated and highly emotional. In the Second World War, there were tens of thousands of prisoners of war, including a former chief, General Kumar Mangalam. Some of our Generals were POWs in China, some in Pakistan. In my own unit, in the 1962 war, some 80 people were taken prisoners, in the 1965 Pakistan war 125 soldiers, including the commanding officer, and five officers were taken prisoners. Later, when I joined in 1968, a large number of these men were still serving and I had a chance to talk to them. Barring the initial moment where you are captured, and the soldiers of the opposing army in an adrenalin rush hit captives, rarely if ever are soldiers subject to methodical torture.

The reason why torture does not happen is because while they have our prisoners, we have theirs. Also, there is the Geneva Conventions (on the laws of war), and when all is said and done, countries do follow it. The Pakistan Army is as professional as ours. Although, I have not had a chance, but those soldiers who have gone to Pakistan on professional official visits, have said that on entering a Pakistan unit, a Pakistan officers mess or a soldiers' mess, it is a mirror image. Even when on UN missions amongst Pakistani and Indians, there is no difference. So this paranoia about torture is more of an emotional reaction in relation to China and Pakistan. There can be odd cases of torture, but the same thing can happen to men as well as women.

Within the organization, there is the issue of gender crime which will have to be dealt with. At the moment, the women have been in positions of authority as officers. In their dealings with soldiers there was hardly any such incidence involving soldiers. Incidence of sexual misconduct was more likely to involve colleagues or superiors. There have been cases where women officers have been sexually assaulted by their superiors, and there have been cases where women have been manipulative, or were involved in affairs with married people.

RM: One of the major arguments advanced to inhibit the expansion and career progression of women, concerns the burden of women's domestic obligations which undermines their operational capability. The phrase was used by the government pleader in the Supreme Court Babita Puniya case.

Lt. Gen. Panag: Yes, it was repeatedly mentioned. In the United States and Europe, everybody has learnt to cope with these concerns. You have to make a choice. Either you take leave for a certain amount of time to take care of your children, or you start putting your children into crèches, or you rely on grandparents, as is common in the Indian social context. Women by natural instinct or social conditioning, will have to be more involved in the care of children than the men. So this problem will have to be faced, especially when we have a larger number of women in all ranks. We will have to find ways, like starting crèches within the units, and both husband and wife will have to get involved in child care and domestic chores. The problem can be overcome, but within our society, it will be more difficult.

RM: What about the issue of male and female soldiers' distress, PTSD and the large number of suicides reported. Commanding officers, such as Maj Gen Mrinal Suman (2016), have observed that the armed forces have not been able to respond to soldiers' distress, partly because everything that involves emotion, compassion or empathy is sort of clubbed as feminine and stigmatized as of lower order. Is there scope for moving towards a gender integrated army in which different ways of imagining masculinity and femininity can be accommodated?

Lt. Gen. Panag: Actually, as far as suicides are concerned, the rate is lower than the rate prevailing in the rest of the country. Comparative studies have shown that the rates within the Armed Forces compare favorably with those of other armed forces. It gets exaggerated because the media highlights the issue. That is not to say that the issue of mental and psychological well-being has been adequately addressed. In the armed forces we used to have just one psychiatrist at command headquarters at one of the higher hospitals. No psychiatrist was posted in our lower hospitals. Consequently, people behaving a little oddly or under some kind of momentary stress, tended to be referred to for full-scale psychiatric examination. The protocol required you to go under an armed escort and to stay under guard in the hospital. We do have our religious teachers who serve as counsellors, but more formalized training is necessary.

The army has to be more sympathetic towards what the soldiers want. Our system of dealing with soldiers' problems and welfare has to be overhauled. In a recent article, I criticized the government's new policy of requiring soldiers on leave to do social work. It showed a lack of appreciation of why soldiers are granted three months leave in a year, because of the conditions of service which involve family separation (Panag, September 7, 2023).

RM: It's a cliché to speak of the masculinist ethos of the military, is there scope for blurring gender binaries. Recently, *The Indian Express* carried on the front page an AP photograph captioned - *Agniveer First Batch Passing out Parade*. It showed a phalanx of two rows of cadets, and in the middle a male army officer joyously cradling his son (IE 17 August 2023). I read it as suggesting the possibility of displacing gender binaries within the armed forces of hard masculinities and soft femininities.

Lt. Gen. Panag: For cultural change to happen, when women come into all the ranks, the armed forces need to be willing to bring in massive reforms, that is, to confront the challenges of accommodating gender differences between soldiers. Should we bring about uniformity of thinking, uniformity of behavior, uniformity of dress, and shape a uniform military character? This is what we attempt in the military academies and in the group training centers. But despite all this, everybody is different. No two people are alike, and there are strong and weak individual traits. Within the armed forces, we have to pay more attention to the individual and have professional advice readily available.

RM: You emphasize the need to institute scientific studies to systematically examine the requirements for accommodating gender integration. You talk of it taking time. But policy decisions have been announced and the process of gender inclusion is well underway.

Lt. Gen. Panag: I am sure studies must be happening. The induction rate is still very low. We are allowing direct entry of only 20 cadets into the National Defense Academy. Women soldiers have been inducted into the military police and into Assam Rifles. I think the numbers are anything between 100 to 200. Probably, rather than come up with written studies, the trial is based upon the experience with small numbers so as to prepare for an influx of large numbers. The decision on expansion could come all of a sudden. Either the Courts or the government will direct that Parliament has passed a law reserving 30 percent seats for women, and so the armed forces will have to comply. The military must prepare for it.

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