

Decoding the Hypersexual: Interpreting Discourses around the Indian Army Wife amidst Scandal

Nisha Kumari

Abstract

As more uniformed women join the Indian military, insights and challenges emerge about gender integration. This Paper's focus is on a long-standing unofficial member of the army, the soldier's wife as part of the army family. The Army Wife has occupied a central yet unique position, straddling military discipline and patriarchal social norms. As a subject-formation influenced by European modernity, she challenges traditional gender roles and raises concerns about unregulated feminine sexuality.

The army's response to this potential threat involves idealizing the army wife, portraying her as a self-sacrificing, asexual figure. However, when scandals occur, like the murder of Shailza Dwivedi, wife of an Indian Army major, these patriarchal anxieties resurface, often leading to stigmatization and allegations of hypersexuality against the army wife. This paper examines how such events reveal the complex and contradictory discourses surrounding the Indian army wife, and how this figure of the promiscuous army wife is a necessary construction for the Army.

Author Profile

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Introduction

“You are in the Army Now!”

*Welcome to the Army. Oh! Young bride,
You've just joined the Nation's pride!
Now that you have wedded the Olive Green
Life'll be great, as you'd have already seen.*

– *Wedded to the Olive Green* (2014)

On 23 June 2018, Major Amit Dwivedi, unable to locate his wife Shailza Dwivedi goes to the nearby police station to file a missing complaint. Once there, the police show him the dead mutilated body of a woman found the same afternoon in the middle of the Delhi cantonment road. Major Dwivedi identifies the body as his wife's. Suspicion falls on his colleague and brother-officer, Major Nikhil Rai Handa. When caught by the police, Handa confesses to the murder. According to the police, Major Handa was obsessed with Shailza and their affair started about six months ago. After Major Dwivedi discovered their affair, he confronted both of them and asked them to stop it immediately. Apparently, Handa wanted to meet Shailza one last time to try and convince her to divorce Major Dwivedi and marry him. When she refused, in a fit of anger he murdered her.

Soon after the crime, an Adjutant General of the Indian Army, Lieutenant-General Ashwini Kumar visited several army commands and addressed groups of officers and their wives on the moral code of the army. The young wives were instructed on how to read between the compliments they received from their husbands' colleagues. They were advised to be cautious and consider, “Is he complimenting me in front of my husband and his wife, or only in their absence?” (*The Economic Times* 2018).

What made this crime of thwarted passion which is the everyday staple of yellow journalism, a sign of crisis in army discipline and serious enough for the authorities to issue directions on how officers and their wives ought to conduct themselves? Why did it become an occasion for reiterating disciplinary norms for army wives? These norms have been instituted in colonial times and continue to prevail in postcolonial times, and are iterated and reiterated through manuals of conduct for officers' spouses. What do these norms tell us about the army? How do organizations

as large as the Indian Army depend on soldiers' wives to maintain its structure? These are some of the questions the article seeks to address.

In the structure of the army, the wife of the army man occupies a strange liminal position as both a part of the army in the everyday discourse, but differentiated from other members who are recruited officially. She is conscripted into the army and its code of conduct by virtue of her marriage to the male soldier. The nature of her husband's profession requires the wife to alternate between living in highly regulated military stations often overflowing with a hyper-masculine ethos or staying away from her husband when he is transferred to a *field* location without family accommodation. The vulnerability of a married woman away from her husband is a cause of anxiety for a patriarchal society and state. The army wife, as a subject formed in colonial modernity and derived from European notions of the modern woman, challenges Indian patriarchy in ways quite different from that of other women who stay away from their husbands because of migration. This is one of the reasons why the army wife is subjected to greater regulation and societal injunctions than others.

While the institution of the state strives to regulate her body using legal and judicial parameters, the social community of the nation tries to diffuse the threatening sexuality of the woman using different ideological and discursive frameworks. In the everyday, the threat is neutralized through the deification of the army wife into an asexual, sacrificing body that is beyond lowly carnal desires and corruptions of dangerous feminine sexuality. A scandal ruptures that 'everyday'. It brings to the fore patriarchal anxieties regarding the unleashed sexuality of the married but unguarded woman. The scandal foregrounds latent fears of her promiscuity, and patriarchy defends itself by stigmatizing the woman as a hypersexual nymphomaniac. In this paper, I shall use the scandal around the murder of the army wife Shailza Dwivedi to decode the often-contradictory discourses that configure and constitute the subject position of the Indian army wife, at times as asexual and now and then as hypersexual. While, the Paper's focus is on the 'army wife', it is evident that the conceptual framework encompasses the armed forces as a whole i.e. 'military wives'.

Who is the Army Wife? Why Does She Matter?

"The Silent Ranks"

*I wear no uniforms, no blues or army greens,
But I am in the army in the ranks rarely seen.
I have no rank upon my shoulders, salutes I do not give...
But I stand among the silent ranks known as the Army Wife.*

– *Wedded to the Olive Green* (2014, 93)

Quoted above are verses of poems written by army wives in the compilation *Wedded to the Olive Green* (hereafter, *Wedded*). The Editorial Note to the 1999 edition states that the compilation is a ‘reference manual’ for army wives. Through this annual publication, the Army Training Command (ARTRAC) at Shimla, which oversees the training of the army man, also aims to train the woman he marries. The title of the manual makes explicit that the woman married to a soldier is incorporated into her husband’s employing institution by virtue of their marriage. The designation given to her as the ‘army wife’ itself poses the problem that the paper aims to explore. The term is widely recognized and used by several scholars to critique this categorization (Enloe 2000; Biank 2006; Pandey 2021).

Figure 1: Statue at HQ ARTRAC and HQ 11 Corps



Source: *Wedded* 2014, 79

The two sets of verses quoted above from poems written by army wives indicate their self-image. How the state views the army wife is represented by a statue erected at the headquarters of ARTRAC and HQ11 Corps and reproduced in the manual *Wedded* (Figure 1). It depicts a pair of arms wearing red bangles with enlarged hands upholding and supporting a soldier. At the base of the statue the inscription reads,

“A selfless force behind the ‘Indian Army Soldier’. In recognition of her multi-tasking abilities, dauntless spirit, resilience, courage and spirit of sacrifice, she keeps his home happy and contented, enabling him do his duty with sincerity and dedication; for the honor of his Comrades, Unit, Regiment and Country come first, always and every time”.
(*Wedded* 2014, 79)

Cynthia Enloe in *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (2000), highlights the different ways in which militaries maneuver women and ideas of femininity to fulfil militaristic goals. In the preface, she mentions that her initial focus in writing the book was on women soldiers, but soon she realized, not only will that analysis be confining, it will be misleading. It will reinforce the idea that only women soldiers are militarized or that they are more militarized than other women such as military wives, mothers, military nurses, military prostitutes, and wartime rape victims. Enloe argued that this presumption itself is an example of militarized thinking since militaries and states heavily rely on enforcing differences between the women who serve the various needs of the military for sustaining militarization. Therefore, when women soldiers view themselves as superior to military wives, who in turn scorn military prostitutes, and when feminists prioritize wartime rape victims over the struggles of wives, it creates a distance between them, blinding them to the pervasiveness of militarization and the control exercised by the militarized state apparatus over their lives. In this paper, I expand the canvas of exploring gender, security and militarization by exploring the subject-formation of the army wife as integral to a more complex understanding of gendering the Indian armed forces.

In *Maneuvers*, Cynthia Enloe presents a brief account of the birth of the army wife in the British army. She states that before the Crimean War, a soldier was perceived as little more than a beast – an individual whose sole purpose was to kill and be killed. In the late nineteenth century, the Victorian sensibility refashioned the image of the soldier as a moral creature – a man fighting righteously in the interest of the nation. Then, it was felt that a woman was needed to cultivate this moral aspect of the soldier, preferably as “a loyal, respectable, patriotic wife” (Enloe 2000, 155). Military officials realized that if socialized as a military wife, a woman could help the military with many of its goals, including providing emotional support to their husbands to “act like men” during the war (Enloe 2000, 157).

As an individual, the army wife is not an employee of the army. Historically, militaries worldwide have been hesitant to include women in the forces. The former Army Chief, General Bipin Rawat once remarked that inducting women soldiers would create a “ruckus” in the army with demands for maternity leaves and complaints about men peeping into women’s camps (Wahab 2018). Moreover, male soldiers will not feel comfortable taking orders from a woman officer. Evidently, the patriarchal structure of the army struggles with the presence of a woman holding authority. But the wife of the soldier offers a decent compromise, allowing the army to flaunt itself as a woman friendly space with its legacy of the code of chivalry. Having no apparent power of her own but as an extension of her husband, the wife does not threaten the deep patriarchal structures and anxieties of the army.

In the self-narratives of army wives, the wife of a soldier, unlike a civilian wife, is extolled as a woman “made of a different mettle”, having “immense courage, valour, patriotism, sacrifice” (Pandey 2021, xx). The intersecting institutions of marriage, family, army, and the nation-state

exponentially burden her with expectations and obligations, and in return, give her the title of the 'army wife'. Ranjana Malik, wife of a former Chief of Army Staff in her contribution to the *Wedded* titled "*When You are the Commanding Officer's Wife*" stated that the wife is responsible for "ensur[ing] that all members of the family interact together like well-meshed gears" (*Wedded* 2014, 137). In the hierarchical organization of the army, this responsibility trickles down to all the officers' wives, making them the arbitrators of the *extended army family* who prevent the army from breaking down.

In other words, when a woman marries a serviceman, the army conscripts her into the regulatory framework of its masculine ethos and expects her to perform a particular role. Fulfilling these expectations earns her the title of the 'silent rank', celebrated for nurturing and supporting the soldiers, allowing the Army to function in its full glory. In fact, the unpaid labor that the wife performs was recognized as so important that in 2020, the army proposed special spouse training for officers' wives. According to media reports, the advanced spouse training was proposed as an adjunct to her officer husband reaching higher ranks. The spouse too, being required to "ascend in stature" and "obliged to shoulder wider responsibilities linked to managing institutions like schools, skill centers, health centers, hostels, and shopping centers, apart from rendering counselling on marital discord cases" (Aman 2020). It is problematic that the army recognizes the need for training but does not acknowledge the unsanctioned nature of this need.

In the long list of expectations associated with the army wife, prominent is loyalty. The army wife is deified as a chaste woman who reserves her sexuality only for her husband, especially when he is not around. Integrity, loyalty, honor, and selfless service are considered core values of the Indian army (*Wedded* 2014, 52). Like the soldier, the army wife too is expected to demonstrate these qualities as part of the "military way of life". While for the soldier, loyalty "would encompass his allegiance to the Indian Constitution, the army, his unit his 'sathis'", for the wife, her prime devotion is to her husband (*Wedded* 2014, 53).

While all Indian women are expected to be devoted to their husbands, for the army wife, her loyalty to the soldier-husband becomes a matter of national duty and patriotism. Any deviation is seen not only as a betrayal to her husband but also to the army and nation, as exemplified in the Defence Ministry's justification for exempting the armed forces from the law decriminalizing adultery in 2018. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) claimed that, if adultery ceases to be an offense, "there will always be a concern in the minds of army personnel (who are almost entirely men) operating far away from their families under challenging conditions about the family (wife) indulging in untoward activity" (Rautray 2021). The unguarded sexuality of the army wife poses a threat not only to the security of the institution of marriage but also to that of the army as well.

The paper argues that the exclusion of women from the armed forces and the exceptional laws regarding adultery and homosexuality are the army's efforts at mitigating the dangers of feminine

sexuality. The Shailza murder case is an instance of deviation when the army wife fails or refuses to play her designated role. Further, the gendered nature of the discursive politics of this categorization becomes poignant when the nation-state categorizes the army wife as hypersexual while sparing the male officer involved in the crime, though implicated in multiple illicit sexual affairs, from such scrutiny.

Reading in Context: Murder and Scandal

After Major Nikhil Rai Handa's arrest, all efforts were focused on establishing a motive. It was crucial not only for serving Justice but also to explain the scandalous enigmatic incident that had occurred in the mindscape of the nation. In the historic Nanavati case (detailed below) involving the fraternal force the Navy, even after Commander Nanavati was declared guilty of murder by the judiciary, in popular imagination he remained a hero-soldier and a family-man in consonance with their notion of 'natural justice'. In the Shailza murder case, even while the case was *sub judice*, people found lurid explanations that helped them make sense of the event and put it behind them.

The media played an important part in constructing these explanations. It is here that I will break away from the factual and legal aspects of the case to state that what we know to be true or factual and what we do not know, does not essentially matter for forming an opinion on a scandal. Here, the scandal centers on situating an army wife, and as people participate in it, they mould the construction of the 'army wife'. Without making any precise analysis of the degree of media attention and public indulgence in it, I argue that the extent of the scandal's importance is measured by the public intervention that the army makes to discipline its members' conduct.

Earlier traditions of history and social sciences focused on reconstructing and analyzing 'things as they really happened' or 'things as they are' using empiricist and epistemologically objectivist positions. New modes of thinking about history and cultural phenomena have opened up methodological research alternatives that permit certain kinds of readings of texts and discourses that were earlier disapproved of, for instance research around scandalous events. The fictional and non-fictional writings around them, especially the studies by Sumit Sarkar (1989) and Tanika Sarkar (1997) offer insights into social and cultural relations that often escape or are missed out, intentionally or unintentionally, from official or conventional versions. The emphasis, here, is not on the truthfulness and completeness of the evidence, but on meaning making that takes into account the absences and multitudinal varieties of such texts.

Sumit Sarkar uses the term "exceptional-normal" to define a scandal- "a local event that had interrupted the everyday only for a brief moment but had been unusual enough to leave some traces" (1989, 94). Tanika Sarkar justifies the worthiness of a scandal as a subject of study as an event that is both,

part of the 'ordinary' and the everyday, as well as includes dimensions that compel serious, wide-ranging discussions on themes of general interest. ... the quotidian and the domesticated at the moment of rupture, at the point of their eruption into public affair. ... It straddles the customary as much as the transgressive... revealing unsuspected meanings in known historical developments. (Sarkar 1997, 65)

Sarkar argued that the process of circulation of such a scandal through newspaper reports, tabloids, farces, and journals constitutes “an emerging public sphere where private people argue about their intimate concerns through novel modes of public communications” (1997, 63). Often such lurid documents tell us a lot more about the nuances of social relations, of caste, class, sexuality, and gender norms than a study of macro-history does.

The Indian army is rooted in colonial history and is influenced by European modernity. Despite ongoing political interventions towards decolonization, one of the organization’s charms for the general public stems from the European character of the army way of life. Its closed enclave culture creates a mystery around army life which further adds to its singularity. For instance, army recruitment advertisements promise a life unlike any other- “live a life less ordinary”. Accentuating the aura around the army is the purposeful invisibility of the army, that is, an invisible power safeguarding the nation, keeping it united, the nation builder (Army, ADGPI-Indian 2016).

It is only at particular moments that the army becomes visible to the nation. One such moment is the Republic Day Parade at India Gate in Delhi when the armed forces of the nation show themselves in their full glory. The timelessness of the Indian armed forces is an important part of the spectacle, with no breaks between the army of the imperial state and the army of the sovereign nation-state, highlighting “constancy and reliability” (Roy 1999, 87). Other instances that produce a powerful impact on public perception of the army include reports of clashes on the borders, crisis deployments to deal with national disasters, or managing civil disorder within the country. However, a public scandal involving armed services jeopardizes this image of “constancy and reliability”. It brings the inside out, exposing both the army and the private musings of outsiders regarding it. In such an event, the army wife becomes a convenient scapegoat for the armed services to cast aside any castigations against its men and itself.

In the recent past, there have been two public scandals involving the armed forces that have registered themselves in the mind of the nation, the Nanavati case and the scandal of wife-swapping in the Indian Navy. The popularity and constant rumination over the Nanavati case have transformed it into a national myth (Khanna 2015). It has inspired books like Indra Sinha’s *The Death of Mr. Love* (2002) and films like *Achanak* (1973), *Yeh Raaste Hai Pyar ke* (1963), and *Rustom* (2016). The case centres on Naval Commander K.M. Nanavati discovering that his wife was having an affair with a businessman, Prem Ahuja, who when confronted is shot dead in a

heated scuffle on 27 April 1959 (Gupta 2021). Nanavati surrendered and confessed to the murder and in court qualified it as self-defense. The case was heavily reported and sensationally framed as an ‘honor crime’ (Sethi 2005). The Bombay High Court sentenced Nanavati to life imprisonment for culpable homicide amounting to murder. The case so captured people’s sympathies that the then Governor of Maharashtra, Vijayalakshmi Pandit was moved to grant him a pardon. In the popular imagination, Nanavati remained a national hero, a gentleman officer (Gupta 2021, 20; Gadihoke 2011).

The Navy wife-swapping scandal surfaced in April 2013 when a naval lieutenant’s wife alleged that she was sexually molested by her husband’s senior officers, and that she was forced to participate in wife-swapping by her husband. She claimed that about 20-30 percent of naval officers indulged in wife-swapping. She, further, alluded to an earlier complaint against wife-swapping at INS Dronacharya in 2011, which reportedly was hushed up by the senior officers (Dhawan 2013). Amid these allegations, the navy dismissed two of its officers on the charges of conduct “unbecoming of an officer”. A General Court Martial (GCM) in Mumbai found one officer guilty of “stealing the affection of a brother officer's wife” as he was having an affair with his senior’s wife (*India Today* 2013). In this framing, the woman and her affections become a commodity that can be stolen, and it is the act of stealing, not the blatant disregard of the woman’s agency and dignity that makes the service man’s conduct “unbecoming of an officer”. The other officer was found guilty of sending lewd messages to several women both in and outside the navy (News18 2013). These scandals showed the officer class in a poor light and exposed them to critical and pejorative comments in the popular media.

Media Reportage and Public Perception

These scandals provide the context which informed the way people responded to the Shailza murder case of 2018. Mainstream and online media, print and audio-visual were saturated with comments and videos replete with moral chastisement. People claiming that wife swapping, extramarital affairs, and sexual favors for promotion were common in the army among the officers and their wives, projecting the military station as an immoral place where “*God knows what happens!*” (News18 2018). Media reports of the Shailza murder case and the public comments they prompted revealed the obsessive attention the case attracted and its impact on creating public perception of army wives as hypersexual. Through the period of April 2018 to January 2019, YouTube videos and websites of Indian news channels, including CNN, News18, India Today as well as print media such as *The Indian Express*, and OneIndia Hindi were replete with pejorative comments and chastisements.

While these comments can be dismissed as ‘extreme’ and the work of misogynist trolls online, I claim significant attention for these comments as they were not exceptional but representative of frequent and ordinary sentiments expressed in anonymous online space. Here, I draw on Tanika

Sarkar's study of meaning making of a scandal. Justifying her project in "Talking about Scandals: Religion, Law and Love in Late Nineteenth-Century Bengal", she argued that the reception of a scandal,

"has the same function as enlarging the scope of gossip, pulling it out of hidden, intimate, familiar circles into the realm of public concern and argument ... thereby creating an interpretative community that reads the text of the event ... If gossip flourishes within an intimate group and draws its discussants into a tighter circle of acquaintances and concerns, a scandal has the same function within an anonymous, abstract public: it draws an unseen community of concerned people closer together by focusing on intimate issues about its constituents. The range of its reception defines the space of the public sphere". (Sarkar 1997, 66)

The popular perception of Shailza was quite different from that of Sylvia, Nanavati's wife. Sylvia's background as a British-born woman allowed her to be excused for her frailty. In the logic of Indian morality, she was likely to be promiscuous. The print media portrayed her as a repentant woman, standing by her husband in court. Further, the formal grip of the regulatory protocols of the armed forces in the new sovereign nation state at the time of the Nanavati case was not as strong as it became by the time of the Shailza case. Moreover, Shailza was an Indian woman, the wife of an army major who must fit the high standards of Indian Army 'wifehood'.

The contrasting representation of the two cases is evident in the moral framing of the R. K. Nayyar film, *Yeh Raaste Hai Pyarke*, (1963) based on the Nanavati scandal. It revolved around the protagonist Anil Sahni (Sunil Dutt), his wife Neena (Leela Naidu) of Franco-Indian birth, and a common friend Ashok Srivastava (Rehman). The original happy ending of the film with the couple reunited had to be changed because the "distributors up North were having none of it" (quoted in Gadihoke 2011, 121). When the film was released, at the end there is a sudden cut, with Neena collapsing in the arms of Anil. The film closes on a funeral pyre. On the changed ending of the film, Leela Naidu in her autobiography writes, "She [Neena] must die of a heart attack, they [the distributors] opined, or the audiences will not accept it. Like Sita, she has been stained. If Sita had to be banished, a mere mortal would definitely have to die" (quoted by Gadihoke 2011, 121). Thus, Shailza's death was natural justice in action (News18, 2018; *India Today* 2018).

Further, Shailza's participation in the *Mrs India Earth 2017* beauty pageant significantly influenced her public perception. Media coverage focused on her beauty pageant title, referring to her as a "model" or "beauty queen". Her pictures in short dresses with close-ups of her shoulder tattoos were heavily broadcasted. This portrayal linked her beauty to her tragic demise, the cause for a fatal attraction that drew the attention of Major Handa. Peoples' comments on her participation in the pageant reflected concerns about "too much women empowerment" and excessive westernization of the Indian Army. While the West's inflection on the 'army way of life'

adds to its allure and permits the army wife a level of modernity as manifest in the wearing of Western clothes, attending parties, and participating in ballroom dancing, it also leads to libertine charges against the wife when accused of promiscuous behavior. One commentator morally chastises that,

“India has exploded with western culture. Army officers were always ahead of the rest of India. They are very liberated. ... They have free time and they engage in fashion shows and Beauty pageants [sic] within themselves. All ingredients of making illicit relations [sic]. This is not Indian culture. A movie will soon be made. No sympathy from my side”. (News18 2018)

Shailza winning the title of the Mrs India Earth contest in 2017 is seized as the moment of corruption that led her astray into an extramarital affair (Oneindia Hindi 2018). Many people opined that army wives should not be allowed by the army to participate in such lowly and scandalous competitions that encourage promiscuity. Raj Dillon, a commentator, writes, “There is futility in having beauty pageants and contests for married women and any effort to enroll for these must be discouraged, if not prohibited” (Deccan Chronicle 2018). Implicit is the presumption that the army should exercise a disciplinary hold on the career choices and lives of the wives. This logically follows the belief that the role of an army wife, like her soldier-husband, is primarily in service to the nation, prioritizing the army’s demands over her personal choices. Furthermore, the stigma attached to modelling and the glamour industry reflects societal discomfort with the excessive visibility of female sexuality.

The two spaces that offer us a glimpse of Shailza Dwivedi’s subjectivity are her *Facebook* account (2022) which reportedly drew Major Handa’s attention to Shailza, and her profile on the Mrs India Earth website which was read as representing her compromised character for the public. Here, Shailza defines herself as a “dreamer, very confident, bubbly, chirpy and happy-go-lucky girl” (Mrs India Earth 2017). She counts her “Double Masters with first division” and her marriage with “the love of my life and blessed with a naughty n[sic] charming boy” as her academic and personal achievements. Writing about her decision to participate in Mrs India Earth, she recalls her childhood dream “to represent my country in any event”. She continues, “In day to day [sic] life a woman [sic] lives for her family and forgets that she is also a girl with carefree life and aspirations. I choose to participate not to prove anything or for the experience of it, but because my heart tells me to do it. For me it is all about myself, meeting new people and feeling beautiful.” Ironically when asked about what bothers her the most in the country, she replies, “Safety of women in our country needs more effort than what is being done now.” This is the Shailza, whose death people who knew her mourned on her Facebook account, calling her “a pure soul” (Facebook 2022). I do not suggest that this is the *truth* of Shailza. What is striking is that we not see this side of her in the media or in public discourse surrounding the scandal. I argue that the popular discourse conspires to label her a promiscuous hypersexual.

In the media coverage, Shailza's early career as a lecturer and her involvement with an NGO teaching underprivileged children were obscured. On the Mrs India Earth website, Shailza mentions that she left her job as "I got married to an Army Officer in Dec 2009 and since then I am a Homemaker as I wanted to devote time to my family". Although Shailza does not say this, many officers' wives have compared their role in the army to a full-time job for which they have left professional careers. Swapnil Pandey, herself an army wife, in the author's note to the book, *The Forces Behind the Forces* (2021), flaunts how an army wife "carelessly throws away" an IIT degree or the Employee of the Month certificate from an MNC or a dream job offer letter, because "she believes her husband has a nobler job than her own", and "she takes it as her duty towards her soldier, and also towards her nation, to support him..." (Pandey 2021, xxi). Swapnil herself calls this selfless deed to be an "effacement" of the woman's identity. This self-abnegation is viewed as a patriotic need and extolled as a virtue.

In the collage of media images, there is one picture only of Shailza wearing a saree, and that appears almost in juxtaposition with a photo of Major Handa. Her blue saree matches Handa's blue shirt subliminally communicating the two are a couple. In that picture, Handa is seen sitting in darkness, holding a glass with ice cubes. It evoked the image of an army drinking party where officers and their wives mingled together, the breeding ground of illicit relationships. The legal and media attention on the case was directed at proving that Shailza's murder was not a crime of passion, but a pre-meditated homicide. Photographs portraying Major Handa at a billiard table in a confident, powerful pose position him as a metaphorical player, even a philanderer (image tweeted by ANI 2018; later reproduced by many news portals). His position as an army major was used by the media to portray him as 'unlike any other criminal', "a hard nut for the police to crack", and a "mastermind". Noticeably, while Major Amit Dwivedi was shown in his uniform, Major Handa was never shown in his uniform. The significance is underscored by the fact that in the earlier military scandal involving Cdr. Nanavati, he too is shown only in uniform, except when the court finds him guilty of the murder (Gadihoke 2011, 108).

The public treated Major Dwivedi quite differently from Cdr. Nanavati. Opinion was far more divided and often on gendered lines as regards Major Dwivedi. Women mostly saw him as a gentleman-officer who despite being aware of his wife's affair, wanted to make their marriage work, and even after her death, sought to defend her reputation by projecting the whole affair as one sided, at Major Handa's insistence. More cynical others saw Major Dwivedi's apologetic posture as a façade aimed at keeping the family name untainted and protecting his child. Conversely, many men perceived him as a stupid incompetent cuckold who failed to control his wife's actions, and thereby questioned his capabilities as an officer. (CNN-News18 2018)

Making her Hypersexual: The Army Intervenes

Soon after the murder hit media headlines and blew up into a very public scandal of thwarted passion within the armed forces, the Adjutant General of the army visited different army commands to address the conduct of not only its young officers but also their wives (*The Economic Times* 2018). Why did the army feel the need to make such a public intervention? Evidently, when an officer's conduct falters it affects the public perception of the army. Regarding the two Majors Handa and Dwivedi, a common observation was, "These two officers have brought great shame to the country. The BIGGEST question... If Indian Army is not able to save their own officers wives, how can we expect them to save our country?" (Emphasis original, CNN-News18 2018). Why did the army feel the need to engage the wives? As evidenced in the manuals of conduct for the officer's wife, the army wife is configured as an extension of her soldier husband. Her behavior reflects on her husband's career prospects. Consequently, when the army proposes special training, the wives resent and oppose it, not because they believe it is unwarranted, but because they fear that their shortcomings in fulfilling the set role may adversely affect their husbands' promotions (Aman 2020). When the officer's wife is seen as unwilling to perform her part as the asexual self-sacrificing woman in service of her soldier-husband and the nation, it is interpreted as a failure on the part of the officer to manage his wife. The hyper-masculine culture of the army expects an officer to prevail over his wife and get her to fulfil her appropriate role. Her unwillingness reflects on the army man's incompetence in the discharge of his duty. While the husband's achievements vicariously become the wife's achievements, her failures become her husband's failures as a leader of men.

Since the army is seen as an essential corps of the nation state, neither the army nor the nation can tolerate such slurs against its officer who was recruited after a long, hard process of selection and rigorous training. It puts the efficacy of the army selection and training program under scrutiny. Convenient then is the alibi of promiscuity of the wife. Officially, the army wife is not under the regulatory regime of the army. The army can excuse itself by blaming it all on the wife, and the nation can go back to believing in the integrity of its armed forces. In this way, the figure of the promiscuous army wife is a necessary construction for the army to absolve itself of any responsibility – moral, ethical, or humanitarian. The sexually out-of-control army wife serves as an excuse for the army to exonerate the organization from any anxiety regarding the hyper-masculine sexuality associated with most militaries in the world.

What lends credence to the above argument is that the figure of the promiscuous, hypersexual army wife is a common one across all militaries in the world. Is it a mere coincidence or is there something behind this configuration that we seem to be inattentive towards? In *Maneuvers*, Enloe warns us that "*Inattention is a political act*" (Italics original, Enloe 2000, xii). She argues that certain feminized ideas like "the fallen woman," "liberated woman," "patriotic motherhood," "marital fidelity," "national sacrifice," and "sexualized respectability" are essential for continued

militarization. These ideas are very delicate, always on the verge of collapsing, and yet, “as potent as a B-52 bomber” (xiv). Enloe maintains that this paradox creates the peculiar narrative of the military sex scandal. The scandal occurs,

“When those delicate maneuvers that have been designed to make ideas about gender work for military ends become confused, and when that confusion becomes visible to the public. The whole story of the political efforts to get women to act and think in ways that sustain the military turns out to be riddled with this paradox: the gendering of any country's military involves some of society's most powerful actors, senior officials of the state; but they often act as though they were on the verge of losing control, losing control of women. Sometimes they are.” (Enloe 2000, xiv).

The priority of the army is to keep itself out of any awkward associations by resorting to heavily monitoring and censoring any cultural representations of the army, the army man, and his wife. Since 2020, any film, documentary, or web-series related to the army must obtain a no objection certificate from the Defence Ministry before release (MoD 2022).

Any kind of literary production is also severely inspected. In 2018, the Indian army even contemplated legal action against an e-book written by Aman K. titled *Indian Army Wife* (2016). The 68-page racy, sensual monograph revolves around wife-swapping for promotion in the army. The former Judge Advocate General, Maj. Gen. T. Parshad described the book as defamatory towards army wives and declared that, “It is not only the duty of the Army but of the entire nation to safeguard the honor and reputation of our ladies from such scandalous write-ups which defame the Army wives as a class” (Baruah 2018). The very need to call for such action reveals how crucial it is for the army to control the narrative around itself and its members.

Conclusion

The army wife is not a neutral description but a concrete subject-formation with a substantial role to play in the ideological framework of the organization. The death of Shailza and the subsequent Army intervention precipitated a crisis that made visible the way the army configures and constructs the army wife, prompting several critical questions. Answering them requires the nation-state to address the deeply patriarchal gendered distribution of power and privilege in an institution that forms an essential corps of the nation-state. The easy way out for patriarchy to defend itself and its men is to blame the woman and stigmatize her as a hypersexual nymphomaniac, beyond redemption.

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