

## Gendering the Indian Military: Unpacking the Constructs of Militarized Masculinity and Femininity

**Kiran Chauhan**

### **Abstract**

The institution of the military represents the stronghold of masculinity, grounded in gendered dichotomies of protector and protected, strong and weak. It perpetuates the image of the iconic 'warrior soldier,' epitomizing strength and power and tasked with safeguarding the 'beautiful souls'. The paper foregrounds the pivotal role of gender in shaping the archetype of the ideal warrior and soldier and urges an evolutionary transformation that encompasses not only gender integration but a radical redefinition of the idea of a 'soldier'. It advocates for a comprehensive re-evaluation and transformation of military culture which involves the dismantling of gender hierarchies of masculine dominance and feminine subordination within the Indian Military. Drawing upon Duncanson and Woodward's concept of 'Re-gendering the Military' and the literature on militarized masculinity and femininity, the Paper examines gender discourses within recent court cases involving the Indian Defence establishment and the Armed Services websites.

### **Author Profile**

**Kiran Chauhan** is pursuing a PhD in International Politics at the Centre for International Politics, Organization, and Disarmament, School of International Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her research primarily centres on Feminist International Relations (IR). Her doctoral research examines the gendered narratives of and around war widows in India, analysing the intersection of gender, state, and security.

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### Introduction

As an institution, the military traditionally represents the stronghold of masculinity. It comprises specific norms and attributes related to valuing physical strength, aggression, competitiveness, power assertion, domination, risk-taking, courage, and heroism. Contrastingly, the military eschews emotional weakness. Compassion, care, compromise, consensus, emotionalism, vulnerability, and submissiveness are conditions, attitudes, values, and norms, commonly associated with femininity, which are denigrated and considered inferior. These dichotomous value constructs are integral to upholding the military system, which is organized around the notions of masculinity and femininity. In the complex relationship between masculinity and war, specific traits of militarized masculinity are acquired through military service and actions and, above all, through combat in the context of the military (Eichler 2014). The notion of militarized femininities refers to how femininity and women are deployed by the military system for its support and maintenance (Enloe 2000).

The military system is based on the gendered dichotomies of protector and protected, strong and weak, wherein it is the duty of the iconic ‘warrior soldier’ who is strong and powerful to protect the ‘beautiful souls’ (Elshtain 1995). As the construction of military masculinities is deeply intertwined with war and the role of the protector, when women start entering and performing well in this domain, these binaries are challenged. Significant scholarship has theorised that the military as an institution is based on the contrast between multiple masculinities and in contradiction with femininities (Hutchings 2008). Not surprisingly then military institutions across the globe have demonstrated resistance and discomfort when it comes to integrating and including women.

In the Indian context, over the last decade, the Ministry of Defence has announced a raft of policy decisions that envision a substantive induction of women in the armed services in all ranks and roles, except frontline combat and parity in terms of service. Recently, the then junior Defence Minister, Ajay Bhatt informed the Parliament on March 16, 2023 about equal service and equal opportunity within the armed forces and emphasized ‘gender neutral’ soldiers (Press Information Bureau March 2023). This Paper seeks to analyse how gender dynamics operate within the institution. It argues that if the institution of the military is to be truly transformed, there is a need to move beyond the rhetoric of a ‘gender-neutral military’ and this requires unpacking the complex

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gendered dynamics of the military system. The Paper sheds light on the pivotal role that gender plays in the construction of the archetype of an ideal warrior and soldier, a construct that now must evolve to accommodate not just women's participation in the military but a radical redefinition of what it means to be a 'soldier.' This paper advocates for a comprehensive re-evaluation and transformation of not only the gender hierarchies present within the Indian Military but also a rethinking of the idea of the soldier and military culture. Drawing upon Duncanson and Woodward's concept of '*Regendering the Military*' (2016) and the existing body of literature theorizing militarized masculinity and femininity, I examine the gender discourses reflected in one, the recent court cases involving the Indian Defence establishment regarding women's and men's roles, participation and equal terms of service, and two, the websites of the Indian Armed Services specifically the Indian Army Website. Through a close analysis of the military's gendered dimensions, the Paper argues for a shift away from the entrenched traditional understanding of the military based on discourses of dominance of masculinity and subordination of femininity. This social transformation necessitates the recognition of gendered hierarchies entrenched within the military which not only serve as barriers to the full inclusion of women within the institution, but also inhibit the potential for radical transformation of the military in terms of its organization, structure and role (Duncanson and Woodward 2016).

The Indian Army's recent decision to establish from 2024 a unified selection board for both male and female officers so as to facilitate gender neutral promotions to the rank of colonel (*The Hindustan Times* 2023), marks a significant and positive stride towards bolstering gender equality within the military. However, achieving gender neutrality is an intricate process that necessitates a critical examination of the prevailing gender norms and hierarchies deeply ingrained within the masculine institution. Often, when organizations refer to 'gender,' their focus is primarily on gender integration. However, gender integration cannot be realized without a comprehensive exploration of the underlying gender discourses and entrenched gender hierarchies. With the increasing expansion of opportunities for women within the military, it becomes imperative to focus on gender dynamics within the operational environment and discourses of the Indian military. Such analyses are crucial steps toward advancing the goals of gender equality and inclusivity as well as reimagining gendered binaries of masculinity and femininity.

Further, amid global conversations around a Feminist Foreign Policy and the advocacy for a gender policy in India's Foreign Policy and civil bureaucracy (Baruah and Bhide 2022; Mehta, Patel, and Tripathi 2023), it is logical to consider a gender policy for India's security domain and the Armed Services in particular (Chauhan 2021). The Indian Army has decided to move towards a gender-neutral army, but gender neutrality also can be discriminatory, as was established in the *Lt. Col. Nitisha vs Union of India* case (Khanna 2022). Male officers were made the benchmark to assess the performance of female officers. The blind application of substantive equality led to discrimination as "the criteria for grant of PCs (Permanent Commission) to women were apparently neutral, but found to be indirectly discriminatory" (Bhatia 2021). Hence, just gender

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neutrality is not enough; there is a need for change in the military in a way that brings transformation in the identity of a soldier, such that the soldier ceases to be masculine or feminine (Duncanson and Woodward 2016).

The first section of the paper begins with a theoretical overview of the relationship between gender and the military and the importance of studying institutions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Next, the paper traces women's role and the contentious pathway toward gender integration in the Indian Military. The paper ends by highlighting gendered hierarchies and their operation in the Indian military and indicates the way forward towards a transformed military. This paper draws upon existing literature on war, gender, and military in feminist and critical military studies (Enloe 1988, 2000; Parashar 2014; Chenoy 2004; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Challenging the traditional binaries of protector and protected, the paper examines the gendered roles of women and men in the military, and takes further the conversation in critical military studies (Basham and Bulmer 2017) towards a possibility of transformation (Duncanson and Woodward 2016; Duncanson 2009).

### **Gender and Military**

Gender, as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is “the behavioural, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one's sex. These traits are not inherent but are socially constructed.” In a patriarchal society, the traits associated with men and masculinity are considered superior to those associated with women and femininity. The dynamic construction of sex and gender is divided chiefly into masculine and feminine stereotypes. These are behavioural norms that are attributed to individuals based on the perception of which category the person is assigned at birth according to sex. Gender is a contingent and changing social fact and process (Sjoberg 2007). Gender and relational dynamics, with its lauded masculinity and denigrated femininity pervades language and culture and de-valorises all feminized statuses (Sjoberg and Via 2010). Feminists question this de-valorisation of the feminine and the glorification of the masculine.

The military is an institution of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), a terrain where the participation of women has been difficult (Segal 1995). Duncanson and Woodward (2016) argue that the military's nature as a gendered organization and its important status as an instrument for guaranteeing state's security makes it a crucial site to understand gender and the interplay between gender and military. What makes someone worthy of military service is based on ideas of masculinity. At the same time, what we define as military service is also a gendered construct and is a question that needs deeper engagement. Militaries the world over have been dominated by men and have been masculine in terms of both structures and culture. Historically, women and femininity have been marginalized in these institutions. The institution is based on the ethos of masculinity, but it bears emphasising that masculinity is not a monolith. The military, like other institutions, is not a site with one fixed construct of masculinity, but a

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spectrum of masculinities based on changing contexts both within and outside the military, depending on the corps, regiment or specialisation and also based on the context of operation (Barrett 1996; Duncanson 2009). Furthermore, newer questions, concerns and requirements are emerging as women become part of this masculine institution, and technological developments reorient strategies and skill sets.

Feminist scholarship has established that women's association with pacifism and men with militarism is not something inherent or biological (Elshtain 1995; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). These differences are socially constructed, and these socially constructed differences are hierarchized, placing men and masculinities higher than women and femininities. Gender identity plays a vital role on the battlefield. Women are not soldiers, but 'women soldiers'; their gender marks their identity on the battlefield, and to be women soldiers amidst the 'brotherhood' of the military brings forth various challenges for women officers because of their gender. (Sjoberg 2007). At the same time, in the domestic domain, women are depicted as icons of patriotism and sacrifice during wars and become symbols of nation, identity, and honor of the community. As a result of this, the stereotype of women being the 'feminine other' remains (Chenoy 2004).

Enloe (2003) comments on how it is crucial to conduct feminist investigations of political cultures in various organizations. Most of these have a sense of gendered division of labour, with some departments masculinized and some feminized. This, Enloe argued, presents a "more accurate causal explanation of patriarchy's global malleability". (Cohn and Enloe 2003, 1191) Demonstrating how, in any organization, departments are somehow always divided into masculine and feminine, Carol Cohn refers to the third committee of the UNGA which deals with social, humanitarian, and cultural issues and in-house is referred to as the 'ladies committee' (Cohn and Enloe 2003).

While liberal feminists argue that women's equal role in the military can further the cause of women's rights, anti-militarist feminists are critical of women's role in the military and sceptical of any possibility of change, as they recognize the military system's connections with capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, racism, and sexism. The anti-militarist feminists argue that the two positions—one espousing the goal of gender equality in military and the other peace and justice—are irreconcilable (Wibben 2014). There are other feminists such as Duncanson and Woodward (2016) who are more open to the possibility that feminist strategies for change as in other workplaces or governance contexts could inform and bring changes in the military. These feminists challenge the anti-militarist feminist deterministic approaches towards the gender-military nexus, which denies the possibility for change within military institutions. They push for envisioning change in the military because it is a particularly 'hard case' and can demonstrate how institutional changes can further the cause of gender justice (Woodward and Duncanson 2017). Drawing from Cockburn and Hubic's conceptualization of a 'regendered military', Duncanson and Woodward make a tentative case for simultaneously pursuing women's military participation and feminist

goals of gender equality, peace, and justice (Cockburn and Hubic 2002 as cited in Duncanson and Woodward 2016).

### **Militarized Masculinity and Militarized Femininity**

Militarized masculinity is constructed based on values like risk-taking, courage, rational decision making and aggression. As explained by Eichler (2014), it is also closely related to military service and combat. Militarized femininities refer to how the military deploys femininity and women for its support (Enloe 2000). Both these ideals involve glorified images of service and sacrifice for the nation, but the discursive distinctions between masculinities and femininities creates a subordinate position for women even in a gender-integrated military (Sjoberg 2007). This is evidenced in the gendered discourse analysis of the court proceedings, media, and government reports relating to the contestation over grant of Permanent Commission for women officers in the Indian Army. It is argued that in the discourse around the case (discussed below), militarized femininity is constructed as complementary to and subordinate to militarized masculinity, whereas men remain the standard soldier, ever combat ready. As Laura Sjoberg put it: “A woman soldier, then, is a woman who can make it as a man; not because masculine values have been questioned or changed, but instead because she adopts those masculine values and participates with them, becoming masculine” (Sjoberg 2007). The paper argues for a through transformation of the military, which involves a new imagination of the military beyond a masculine or feminine soldier.

Militarized masculinities can provide an understanding of the multiple aspects of both war and the military system. Unpacking the concept of militarized masculinity can provide insights into the restrictions placed on women’s role in the military. The construct of militarized masculinity is based in contrast to femininity and draws from hegemonic masculinity. Barrett defines “hegemonic masculinity” as ideal masculinity that is based on the marginalisation and subordination of femininity. Further, in current western culture, it is associated with values like risk-taking, aggression, heterosexuality and rationality (Barrett 2001:79 cited in Hutchings 2008).

While militarized masculinity is not limited to the domain of the military, even within the military there are variations. Barrett in *The Organizational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity: The Case of the US Navy* (1996), argued that masculinities are relationally constructed through associations of difference. He demonstrates this through the different themes that officers in different streams of the US Navy draw from. For instance, officers in aviation drew on themes of autonomy and risk-taking, surface warfare officers focused more on perseverance and endurance, while supply officers drew on technical rationality more. He further supports his case by showing how masculinities are constructed through contrasting definitions of femininity. Hutchings also explains how the literature around war and masculinities is not tied to any fixed content of “masculinity”. The meaning of masculinity is made and remade again and again through “a logic

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of contrast (between different masculinities) and a logic of contradiction (between masculinities and femininity)” (Hutchings 2008, 390).

Enloe defines militarized femininity as the militarization of both women and femininity, and her conceptualization of militarised femininity is much broader than just the figure of women soldiers (Enloe 1993; Enloe 2000). Similarly, the concept of militarized masculinities, is much broader than the militarization of men as soldiers. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will be using these concepts to look at how militarized femininity and militarized masculinity is constructed in the case of a soldier, male and female.

Sjoberg in her work on women soldiers in the US in engaging with the question of women’s agency in violence and torture and the use of femininity to construct the enemy and his/her denigration, argued that gender discourses of subordination of femininity remain even in a gender-integrated military (Sjoberg 2007). Gender subordination is defined as the ideal militarized femininity. This also happens within the Indian Military, where masculine men become the standard soldier, and even when women soldiers are given entry, their roles are constructed in a way that is subordinate to the masculine ideal and structured along a gendered division of military labour.

### **Women and the Indian Military: Challenging Tokenism**

This section provides a short overview of women’s role and integration in the Indian military, flagging important milestones, challenges, and limitations. This follows with analysis of gendered discourses in the military, and specifically in the Indian Army. It is argued that the entrenched ideas of the ideal male soldier, invariably render invisible the role and presence of women soldiers in the military.

Women were first inducted into Indian Armed Forces in 1992, but the history of Indian women’s participation in the Armed Forces goes long back to the World Wars. During the Second World War, as the British Army needed more personnel in support duty, women in India were recruited into the British Army. As a result, Women’s Auxiliary Corp-India (WAC-I) was created in April 1942 and worked with both the Army and the Air Force. Women also played a significant role militarily in the fight against the British. Subhash Chandra Bose involved women in the military struggle against the British and formed an all-women regiment of the Indian National Army on July 12, 1943, named the *Rani of Jhansi Regiment* (RJR) after the legendary Rani Laxmibai, who played an iconic role in the revolt of 1857. Despite Bose’s pioneering vision of women and military, the women soldiers never engaged in combat and as Vera Hildebrand in her study of the RJR contends, the role of the regiment was more of a performance. “The much-acclaimed Ranis’ training programme placed primary emphasis on marching through towns, carrying rifles, looking smart in khaki uniforms and singing patriotic songs” (Hildebrand 2016, 243). The gendered

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division of military labour with distinct regiments of male and female soldiers is apparent in Bose's INA too (Hildebrand 2016; Choudhry and Srivastava 2022).

One aspect where women soldiers have been given more space and have actually become an important part of India's foreign policy is in UN Peacekeeping. In 2007, India became the first country to provide the first All-Female Formed Police Unit (FFPU) for UN Peacekeeping Mission in Liberia. This was promoted as a part of India's commitment to the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda ushered in by UN Security Council Resolution 1325. India's WPS agenda remains outward looking, negating the challenges brought up by women in various armed conflict zones within the country especially in the North-east (Manchanda 2020). Furthermore, challenges to gender mainstreaming exist in international peacekeeping as well. Scholarly and media narratives frame female peacekeepers as providers of 'softer' human security with a focus on community policing and tackling SGBV (Sexual and gender-based violence). This feminization of their role negates not only the scope for broader contribution but also the contribution of male soldiers who do similar work (Karim 2019). This gendered division of labour creates a stark distinction between a male and a female peacekeeper and thus the goal of gender mainstreaming gets limited due to the gendered roles prescribed to women security providers which reifies the gendered division of security labour and mirrors the broader asymmetry in various branches of Indian security forces (Klossek and Johansson-Nogués 2021).

### **Inducting the Feminine Other in the Masculine Military**

In the case of the Indian army, the ethos and the motto of the organisation is defined in exclusively masculine terms, based on the camaraderie of male soldiers. The Army's website in detailing "Our Ethos" (Indian army our-ethos 2024) lists a number of values infused in soldiers through years of training. The language in which the army's ethos and values are articulated is strongly resonant of an exclusive masculinity which in the process fattens out the presence and impact of the women officers who have been part of the Indian Army for over two decades, since 1992. The army remains a brotherhood where women are the feminine other, as inscribed on the website. The list of values begins with "Espirit-de-Corps" and alludes to the spirit of comradeship and brotherhood of the brave, regardless of caste, creed or religion. The motto is, "One for all and all for one" (Indian Army website 2024). Another section focuses on the Chetwode Motto or Credo of the officers passing out from the Indian Military Academy in Dehra Dun. Embodying the high standard of military ethics the Credo states, "The safety, honour and welfare of your country come first, always and every time. The honour, welfare and comfort of the men you command come next. Your own ease, comfort and safety come last, always and every time" (Indian Army: Our Ethos 2024). The official website of the Indian army demonstrates how the language of the organization centres the 'male' as the ideal fighter while marginalising if not ignoring the long-standing role and participation of women in the army, including in the Military Nursing Service.



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In contrast, the official website of the Air Force is a little better in terms of including women in the various sections of the website. On the website of the Air Force, the section explaining the role and values of an Air Force officer uses the gender-neutral nomenclature “Air Warrior”, and relative care has been taken to include she/her pronouns almost throughout the section. However, neither the history section nor any other section deals with women officer’s inclusion and induction specifically. In the ‘Careers’ section there are slippages such as “The valiant boys could be part of the Indian Air Force family by applying for NDA (National Defence Academy)” (Indian Air Force website 2024).

Invariably, when women are added to the military without attention to the discursive and performative elements of gender dichotomies, this leads to gender subordination even in a gender-integrated military as critical feminist security studies scholar Laura Sjoberg emphasizes (2007). When looking into gender integration in the military, it is crucial to look at the discursive aspects of gender subordination. As Cohn in her influential analyses of the security domain elucidates-

*“Every person who enters this world (world of National security and defence experts) is also participating in a gendered discourse in which she or he must adopt the masculine position to be successful. This means that it is extremely difficult for anyone, female or male, to express concerns or ideas marked as ‘feminine’ and still maintain his or her legitimacy.”* (Cohn 1993).

The same is the case of military women, who to gain acceptance and legitimacy imbibe masculine and militaristic attributes. The military remains one of the sites of hegemonic masculinity in society. It is a space dominated by a masculinist discourse, and hence just adding more women doesn’t alter that setup (Cohn 1993). The strong belief in traditional gender roles makes it difficult for male soldiers to accept the contribution and role of women soldiers (Bakshi 2006). To critically look at and understand women’s participation and the challenges to it, one needs to look at the military as an institution critically. Using a critical gender lens, Sjoberg and Via argue that when women join the Military, “they join groups whose terms, premises, and behavioural norms are already defined in terms of the masculine values that they have prized before the inclusion of women” (2010, 06) This creates dual challenges for women soldiers as they struggle constantly to prove themselves. Confronting excessive performance pressure, compared to their male peers, they face a simultaneous dissociation with their own gender because of the unconventional career choice they have made (Bakshi 2006).

What is particularly striking are the gendered discourses articulated by the military establishment to oppose gender parity in service of female and male officers. They are illustrative of deep-seated stereotypes regarding women in the Military. As one looks at the arguments advanced during the court proceedings in opposition to women officer’s permanent commission, the gendered

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understanding of what constitutes a soldier becomes clear, as is illustrated in the following submission made to the court,

*“The profession of arms is not only a profession but a ‘way of life’, which often requires sacrifices and commitment beyond the call of duty by the entire family of service personnel involving separation, frequent transfers affecting education of children and career prospects of the spouse. As a consequence, it is a greater challenge for WOs (Women Officers) to meet these hazards of service, owing to their prolonged absence during pregnancy, motherhood and domestic obligations towards their children and families, especially when both husband and wife happen to be service officers.” (S.C. Secr., Ministry of Defence vs. Babita Puniya and Ors. 2020, 24).*

Evidently, the burden of domestic care and family is a burden only to be borne by women officers. This shows how soldiering as a profession for men is based on the care and work provided by the spouse, which becomes a challenge when women join the same profession. Though the court deemed these ideas as outdated and based on sex stereotypes, it also acknowledged how serving in the forces is “rendered infinitely more difficult when society relegates functions of domestic labour, caregiving and childcare exclusively on shoulders of women” (S.C. Lt. Col. Nitisha & Ors v. Union of India & Ors 2021, 59)

Given the Indian Defence Ministry’s claims to have a gender-neutral army, it is crucial to see how gender operates implicitly and explicitly in the institution. Being a woman soldier amidst the masculine tropes of ‘brotherhood’ in the military throws light on various challenges women officers face every day. It is argued that unless the underlying gender discourse is challenged, the otherization of women officers is bound to continue. During the *Babita Puniya case* hearings, arguments were made under the head of each of the following categories ‘Exigencies of Service’, ‘Physical Capabilities’, ‘Composition of Rank and File’, and ‘Infrastructure’. The reasons given were based on a prejudicial understanding of the role of women in society. These arguments were based on the assumption that soldiering is ‘naturally’ a more appropriate profession for men, and adjustments and changes are to be made for women hence the male body becomes the ideal soldier.

The narrativized arguments advanced by the Defence establishment reveal how women SSC (Short Service Commission) officers were not considered relevant for the army’s primary war fighting role but to be ‘utilised’ for specialised tasks such as ‘language interpreters,’ ‘imagery interpreters’ and ‘cyber and information technology’ (S.C. Secr., *Ministry of Defence vs. Babita Puniya & Ors.* 2020, 19). More importantly, references to adverse conditions of service which include an “absence of privacy” in field and insurgency areas, “maternity issues” and “child care” (SC Secr., *Ministry of Defence vs. Babita Puniya & Ors* 2020, 24). exposed deep-seated stereotypes about gender roles, where women officers’ prescriptive roles are in domain of language, cyber and IT

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cells. The Indian military cannot envision a gender-integrated military without challenging the gendered binary of what constitutes being a man and a woman soldier.

Gender prejudices and entrenched inhibitions about gender roles are mirrored in the official website of the Indian Armed Services. Beyond the media's disproportionate showcasing of 'Nari Shakti' (Women Empowerment) comprising of smartly turned-out women officers in Republic Day parades, it tends to reinforce tokenism rather than inclusion. In the official websites of the armed services, women officers are barely noticeable, as illustrated in the section above. While several firsts by women officers are always lauded and celebrated in the annual military report under the title 'Nari Shakti', the struggle for women officers in the military remains a constant battle. Several analysts, including those within the military such as Capt. Deepanjali Bakshi (ret'd) writing in the *Line of Fire* about the experiences of the early batches of women officers, commented on the "utter lack of seriousness of most men" regarding women serving as professionals in the armed forces, while "a cross section of women themselves are content with their limited-service role" (Bakshi 2006).

Women officers were largely marginalised, denied any decision-making role and structurally deprived of opportunities for career advancement. That changed with the Supreme Court of India's landmark judgement of February 17, 2020 in the Babita Puniya case granting PC for women officers in ten branches of the Indian Army and opening up appointments to command posts and career advancement for women officers (*SC Babita Puniya and Ors* 2020). It was a welcome step towards long resisted gender parity in the Indian Armed Services. A year later, on 18 August 2021, the Supreme Court followed this with another critical directive, allowing women to qualify for the National Defence Academy, the premier institution for moulding top ranking officers of the Armed Services. But these developments were hard won by years of struggle by the women officers with the Courts becoming sites of struggle in creating a level playing field for women officers.

### **Regendering the Indian Military: Way Forward**

Challenging the gendered notion of what constitutes being a soldier requires much more than increasing the numbers of women. Removing various kinds of entry barriers is just the first step in the process. A great deal more needs to be done about women's equality and participation in the Indian Military. To understand the inclusion of women in the military and the resistance towards these developments, one needs to look at the military with a "Feminist Curiosity" (Enloe 2004). In past years, the Indian Military has opened more and more avenues for women's participation. A series of positive and inclusive steps have been taken that now provide an opportunity for more equal participation of the women officers. Although such developments in women's more equal participation are all laudable and steps in the right direction, are they enough? Is just having more and more women in the military sufficient? The numbers may rise over the years, but will that make the military gender-neutral as the MOD aims to make it? In a patriarchal society,

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organizations of hegemonic masculinities like the military do not suddenly become gender-neutral, just because they are now willing to include more women (Cohn 1993).

Squadron Leader Vidula Abhyankar (retd.), argued that changes need to be made at the “cradle of the Armed Forces”, at the National Defence Academy, which till recently remained a male bastion (quoted in Roychowdhury 2020). She also suggested that if entry-level is made identical for both genders, at the most basic level, this could lead to better integration and acceptance of women in the military. Then perhaps a sense of camaraderie and faith can be generated (Roychowdhury 2020). Also, Sainik Schools now have opened up for girls, along with the opportunity to join the service after grade 12<sup>th</sup> through the NDA National Defence Academy Examination. These are steps in the right direction.

Even in terms of representation, India has a long way to go. As per Ministry of Defence statistics, the percentage of women in the Indian Army, Indian Air Force and Indian Navy was 3.97%, and 13.6% and 6% respectively (Press Information Bureau 2023). What are the persisting challenges in the integration and participation of women in the Indian Military? Does the answer lie in looking at the Indian Military through a gendered lens? In the words of Jill Steans, “To look at the world through a gendered lens is to focus on gender as a particular kind of power relation or to trace out the ways in which gender is central to understanding international processes” (Steans 2002, 8). Looking at the military from a gender lens would mean focusing on gender in its everyday practices and organizational structure and discourses. A focus on the mundane and day-to-day practices brings forth what remains hidden and is considered inconsequential without a gender lens. We cannot afford to ignore the cultural politics of every day simply because that is where the effects of political processes are normalized (Åhäll 2019).

The struggle with the masculine character within the institution is a battle that women officers are continuously fighting. It is reported by women officers that protocols like standing up and saluting when a senior enters, often are not followed in the case of female officers (Roychowdhury 2020). Evidently, there is need for developing a gender policy for the Indian Armed forces to make the armed forces more conducive for women officers’ participation. India can take inspiration from various armies the world over, including the militaries of the global south. For instance, the Armed Forces of Nigeria (AFN) are implementing an Armed force of Nigeria Gender Policy (Samson 2021). In the Indian context, there is need to reform the training, recruitment, language practices and other attitudinal aspects of the organization. A gender policy will ensure more equal and just participation of women in the Indian Military.

Even after PC was allowed for women officers, the measure for providing PC for women was standardised to masculine standards. These standards were challenged as being discriminatory in the *Nitisha vs Union of India* case in 2021. In order to be considered for PC women officers were required to match the physical fitness standards of young men now being considered for PC. The

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judiciary deemed the practice of applying the fitness standards of a 25 to 30 years man to a woman of 40 to 45 years as unfair (*Nitisha vs Union Of India* on 25 March, 2021). The fitness standards of youthful male officers were used as a benchmark for qualifying women officers. The standards of militarized femininity were derived from the masculine standard, thereby showing up the limitations of the notion of gender neutrality and the hegemony of masculinity in military practices.

Moreover, the culture of military and soldiering as a job, is based on negation of emotions like grief and pain, a soldier is not supposed to shed tears or show pain (Suman 2016). Further, gender integration is not just about allowing women to have a more active role in more streams in the military but also about creating an enabling environment for men to take up jobs deemed feminine within the military domain, like military nursing service. In a recent judgment, the Delhi High Court questioned the rationale behind barring men from joining the Indian Army as nurses (Times Now 2023). According to the Military Nursing Service Ordinance 1943 and Military Nursing Service (India) Rules 1944, only women are eligible to join the Indian Military Nursing Service. The PIL challenging these rules argued that these rules perpetuate the stigmatization of male nurses.

A gender-neutral army requires reconstruction and the transformation of the whole idea of a soldier so that the categories of masculine and feminine become irrelevant (Duncanson and Woodward 2016). Thus, a transformation in the idea of soldiering itself is needed, and according to Duncanson and Woodward, it is possible through three strategies - inclusion, reversal, and displacement. Indian Military has been taking many steps in terms of inclusion. The reversal of traditional gender norms is an ongoing process, but most of that is spearheaded by women officers struggling to redefine terms of inclusion often by recourse to the judiciary. Whether the existing rocky pathway towards a gender-neutral force leads to the displacement of gender hierarchies remains a question?

### Conclusion

This paper highlights the gendered discourses around the construction of an ideal soldier and the limitation of aiming for gender integration without examining the gender subordination of femininity and women in the context of the military. As the Indian Military is aiming to move towards a gender-neutral structure, this paper presents the pitfalls of aiming for gender neutrality without a deeper engagement with the existing gendered discourses in the military. It argues for a recognition of the entrenched gendered structures, practices and attitudes as necessary to transform the military, if India really wants to create a gender-integrated military. This requires a move towards a 'soldier identity' that isn't constructed based on gender binaries and the subordination of the feminine to the masculine. Incorporating Duncanson and Woodward's conceptual analysis of 'regendering' (2016), the aspiration is to move towards a soldier with a 'peacebuilder identity' open to both men and women, such that both masculine and feminine are valued equally, and eventually, the distinction itself ceases to exist. It promises the possibility of a complete

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transformation of the military as an institution. As steps are taken to transform the masculine bastion, the military, this can have implications for gender integration and gender justice in other aspects of society as well.

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