

THE CASE FOR WOMEN IN COMBAT ROLES: A HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract: This work purposes to addresses the issue of gender construct in general and its take on combat roles in particular. Through study of gender history and various works written on the subject related to wars, battles and conflicts, this article is an effort to investigate ability of women as combatants and bring to light that there is no role or profession which can be limited to a particular sex as women today have outperformed in all spheres breaking the shackles of patriarchal mindset. The recent SC order granting permanent commission to women in army is a shift from regressive gender biasness and is a prove that gender should not be the criteria to determine professional ability. Here, taking glance at this issue by highlighting women in past who have displayed exemplary strength and courage would be the main target.

Keywords: Gender, Patriarchy, Combat, History

1.0 Introduction

Firstly, it becomes important to distinguish between gender and sex. Often used interchangeably, they have a different meaning altogether. While sex refers to the biological differences, gender is a social construct. The concept of gender is developed overtime by society by dividing roles between males and females using biological differences as ground for social inequality, discrimination, oppression and subjugation.

Army, where an individual has to display flawless physical potential is thought to be a male dominated realm since ancient times. The idea of women being in combat Roles-Armored corps and infantry requires a societal change first and Family is the first patriarchal institution where boys learn to dominate and girls are taught to be shy and submissive. Giving right values to our youth would be the first step in dismantling patriarchy. We all must know our history and form rational opinions away from the gender constructs of society. The recent debate around the Supreme Court order forms the backdrop of this article. There is a gradual awareness arising among people but there are many more steps to climb this ladder and reach a point where women are viewed equal to men.

2.0 Objectives

The objectives of this work are to:

1. To generate a study challenging the existing assumptions related to the limits of women participation and ability in armed conflict.
2. To trace the history of women in combat roles in Indian context and attack patriarchal mindset.
3. To view from the lens of authors who have already written and presented their views on this issue.
4. To prove and form a rational opinion that there is no significant difference in males and females and no professional sphere or realm should be restricted to a single sex.

3.0 History of Women in Combat roles

“Women have a history and women are in history, they are and always have been actors and agents in history.
Women have made history yet they don’t know their history.”

-Gerda Lerner, 1986

Here, I’ll take you through our past starting from ancient times to the present era, talking about the women at war or in combat roles. While historically, fighters and warriors have mostly been males, there have been various accounts of females participating in battles. These fearless female fighters have each made an indelible mark on history.

“Nijabhujadanda nipatitakhanda
Vipatitamunda bhataadhipate
Jaya jaya he Mahisasuramardini ramya
Kapardini shailasute”

The above hymn is dedicated to Goddess Durga and depicts how she cuts down her enemies to hundred pieces. She had torn down apart the toughest demons.

Indian women warriors like Vishpala, Lankini(keeper of Lanka) and Shikhandi were well-versed in the art of warfare.

Queen Rudrama Devi of Warangal of 11th century trained particular style of martial art to her army and was a very tough fighter. She pushed Eastern Ganga dynasty beyond the river Godavari and defeated Yadavas of Devagiri, who ultimately surrendered large chunks of territory to her.

Rani Abbakka, Keladi Chennamma, Kittur Chennamma are few warrior queens of this era of Southern India. Portuguese were defeated several times at the hands of Rani Abbakka. Keladi Chennamma fought with Mughals and Kittur Rani Chennamma led an armed rebellion against the British East India Company in 1824 and defended her territory.

Rajput women of Northern India fought bravely in battlefield. Rani Karnavati of Garhwal earned the nickname "Naak kati rani" being famous for cutting the nose of invaders and fighting fiercely.

Rani Durgavati of Gondwana defeated Baz Bahadur and nearly defeated the Mughals till an arrow pierced her eye and she died of injuries.

Rani Bhavashankari of Bhurshut kingdom of Bengal defeated the Pathans there.

Tarabai, from Western India was like thorn in the flesh of Aurangzeb. She was a woman of incredible courage and spirit and is known as the indomitable warrior queen of the Marathas.

Razia Sultan, the only female ruler of Delhi Sultanate is known to have the abilities of an able ruler. Minhaj-i-Siraj agreed that she was more qualified and capable than her brothers and Iltutmish considered Razia equal to 20 of his sons in ability.

Nur Jahan, who held the strings of empire and Chand Bibi of Ahmednagar are other examples.

Great revolt of 1857 had active participation from women. The famous Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi and her aide Jhalkari Bai, who risked her life to help Rani Lakshmibai escape are known to everyone. They are considered to be epitome of female bravery. Begum Hazrat Mahal, who built her own army and recaptured Lucknow from British, Azizun Bai-who fought dressed in male attire and armed with pistols, Uda Devi etc are others who fought bravely in 1857 revolt. Rani Lakshmibai became the resistance symbol for nationalists.

Uda Devi and other female Dalit participants are today remembered as the warriors or "Dalit Veeranganas" of the 1857 rebellion. According to some reports, she is known to have climbed a pipal tree from where she shot dead 32 or 36 British soldiers.

The freedom struggle was a phase in Indian history which saw vigorous participation from women all over the country. Umabai Kundapur played a major role. She was the founder of the Bhagini Mandal and the leader of women's wing of Hindustani Seva Dal. In 1932, she was arrested and kept in Yerwada jail for four months. The story of Janakidevi Bajaj, the women who gave up all comforts of life for freedom of India is known only to a few. Hansa Mehta, the daughter of Dewan of Baroda fought for gender equality throughout her life. Kalpana Dutt made bombs for revolutionaries, Pritilata Waddadar dressed as a Punjabi man to attack a European club in Chittagong.

Rajkumari Gupta was the one who did the giant task of supplying guns and pistols for Kakori robbery. Matangini Hazra died by gushots while chanting Vande Mataram. Accamma Cherman won the title of 'Jhansi Rani of Travancore' by Mahatma Gandhi. Maharani of Travancore reigned as the regent queen for her minor nephew of Travancore estate in Kerala in 20th century.

Rani Gaidinliu, the freedom fighter from Northeast India led a revolt against British rule. She was arrested in 1932 at the age of 16 and received the title 'Rani' from Jawaharlal Nehru.

The formation of Indian National Army Comprising Rani of Jhansi Regiment (RJR) was the first such all women regiment in army in the world. Laxmi Sehgal, Janaky Athi Nahappan are the ones who led RGR of INA. Author, **Vera Hilderbrand**, has done an amazing work in her book *Women at War* dealing with the rani of Jhansi regiment. She considers it important to make this popular especially among children so that they learn to respect women and see that women are equally capable of serving every profession. She gives an account of the RJR formed in Singapore in 1943 and tells about the bravery of women soldiers who courageously encountered the enemy in combat in dense and swelting jungles of Burma. Her book tells us about the valiant women in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment.

4.0 A Rational Approach

If the idea of RGR could be thought of roughly 80 years ago, then why did it took so long to work on the idea of granting permanent commission to women in army. There could be many reasons for this. To name a few, the patriarchal mindset of people and not to take commands from women or work under them; to consider them physically unfit for these professions; for fear of being raped after taken prisoners of war; for menstrual and pregnancy related issues etc.

These causes are being addressed and challenged to a greater extend today. Women in sports like Mary Kom(boxing), Mithali Raj(cricket), Geeta Phogat, Sakshi Malik(wrestling) have made us proud internationally and have smashed the myths of feminine physical weakness. Meenakshi Gurrukul is a prime example from modern day who is well versed in Kalaripayattu, the traditional martial arts form of Kerela and even defeats her male opponents at the rip age of 76.

A large number of people who participated in a BBC survey in India say that women are as good as men at sport. In his well-known work on women in military, **Joshua S Goldstein** notes that 'combat forces in the world's state armies today include several million soldiers and 99.9% are male as they have been motivated by their masculinity'. Soldiers continue to understand themselves in masculine terms.

Female soldiers have themselves affirmed that "In the combat arms trades, you are equally accountable, it is task oriented and task based, it is about meeting the standards and not about gender".

Manoj Joshi, in his article *In combat roles: The need for women's fairer participation in the military*, as in the work force writes –

"It most certainly requires a sharp understanding of what patriarchy is all about and the ways in which society can and should, remove the social and cultural disabilities that have hobbled women through the ages".

The inherent toughness of women cannot be looked just in exotic sports but also by looking at nearby worksite and you will see female workers doing exactly the same work as males.

Pamela D Toler, an American historian, who specializes in military history and women's history says, "Women have always fought and we've tended to lose sight of it."

5.0 Conclusion

This work was a step towards generating awareness among people and specially youth that women have equally participated in shaping the world since ancient times by citing examples from the past and to divulge from the regressive patriarchal approach of separating and dividing works and roles based on gender. Women are strong and they can participate in every profession on an equal footing. India is a developing nation and shaping people's thoughts in the right direction will bring a huge change not only economically but socially.

To end this, I would use a beautiful quote:

"You were born with wings,
Why prefer to crawl through life."

-Rumi

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