



Women in Combat Role in ITBP

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Why in News

For the first time, the **Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP)** inducted women officers in the combat role. Two women officers joined it as Assistant Commandants (AC).

Indo-Tibetan Border Police Force

- **ITBP** is a **Central Armed Police Force** functioning under the **Ministry of Home Affairs**, Government of India.
Other Central Armed Police Forces are: **Assam Rifles (AR)**, **Border Security Force (BSF)**, **Central Industrial Security Force (CISF)**, **Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF)**, **National Security Guards (NSG)** and **Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB)**.
- The ITBP was raised on **24th October, 1962** during the **India-China War** and is a **border guarding police force** specializing in **high altitude operations**.
- Presently, ITBP is deployed on border guarding duties from **Karakoram Pass in Ladakh to Jachep La in Arunachal Pradesh** covering 3488 km of **Indo-China Border**.
- The Force is also deployed for **Anti Naxal operations** and other internal security duties.
- ITBP was initially raised under the **Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) Act, 1949**. However, in **1992, parliament enacted the ITBPF Act** and the rules were framed in 1994.

Key Points

- **About:**
 - Women officers joining the ITBP as officers have served in combat roles earlier as well.
 - However, it was only in 2016 when the appointment of women as combat officers through the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) entrance exam conducted by the UPSC (**Union Public Service Commission**) was approved.

- **Status of Women in the Indian Armed Forces (under the Ministry of Defence):**

- The **Army, Air Force and Navy** began **inducting women as short-service commission (SSC) officers in 1992.**

This was the first time when women were allowed to join the military outside the medical stream.

- One of the turning points for women in the military came **in 2015 when Indian Air Force (IAF) decided to induct them into the fighter stream.**
- In **2020**, the **Supreme Court (SC)** ordered the central government to grant **Permanent Commission (PC) to women officers in the Army's non-combat support units** on par with their male counterparts.
 - The SC had **rejected the government's stand of women officers' physiological limitations** as being based on "sex stereotypes" and "gender discrimination against women".
 - Women officers have been granted PC in the Indian Army in all the ten branches where women are inducted for SSC.
 - Women are **now eligible to occupy all the command appointments**, at par with male officers, which would open avenues for further promotions to higher ranks for them.
- In early **2021**, the **Indian Navy deployed four women officers on warships** after a gap of almost 25 years.

India's aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya and fleet tanker INS Shakti are the warships that have been assigned their first women crews since the late 1990s.
- In **May 2021**, the **Army inducted the first batch of women into the Corps of Military Police**, the **first time that women joined the military in the non-officer cadre.**

However, Women are **still not allowed in combat arms like Infantry and Armored Corps.**

- **Issues with Women in Combat Role:**

- **Physical Issues:** The natural physical differences in stature, strength, and body composition between the sexes make women more vulnerable to certain types of injuries and medical problems.
 - Pre-entry physical fitness levels tend to be lower in most women recruits compared with men.
 - Hence, when standards of training remain same for the two genders, there is a higher probability of injuries among the women.
- **Physiological Issues:** The natural processes of menstruation and pregnancy make women particularly vulnerable in combat situations.
 - Lack of privacy and sanitation can result in an increased incidence of genitourinary infections.
 - The effect of prolonged deployment in difficult terrains and grueling physical activity on the reproductive health of women is still unknown.
- **Social and Psychological Issues:** Women tend to be more attached to their families, particularly their children.
 - This translates into greater mental stress and requirement of social support to sustain themselves during prolonged separations from family.
 - The issue of military sexual trauma (MST) and its effect on the physical and mental well-being of women combatants is grave.
- **Conventional Barriers:** Cultural barriers in society may be the biggest impediment to induction of women in combat.

Another major question that needs to be studied is the acceptance of orders of the women officers by the jawans.

- **Counter-Arguments:**

- **Gender is not a Hindrance:** As long as an applicant is qualified for a position, one's gender is arbitrary. In the modern high technology battlefield, technical expertise and decision-making skills are increasingly more valuable than simple brute strength.
- **Military Readiness:** Allowing a mixed gender force keeps the military strong. The armed forces are severely troubled by falling retention and recruitment rates. This can be addressed by allowing women in the combat role.
- **Effectiveness:** The blanket restriction for women limits the ability of commanders in theater to pick the most capable person for the job.
- **Tradition:** Training will be required to facilitate the integration of women into combat units. Cultures change over time and the masculine subculture can evolve too.
- **Global Scenario:** When women officially became eligible for combat positions in the American military in 2013, it was widely hailed as another step towards the equality of sexes. In 2018, the UK military lifted a ban on women serving in close combat ground roles, clearing the way for them to serve in elite special forces.

Way Forward

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- Women were being kept out of command posts on the reasoning that the largely rank and file will have problems with women as commanding officers. Thus, changes have to take place in the culture, norms, and values of not only the rank and file of the Army but also that of society at large. The responsibility to usher these changes lies with the senior military and political leadership.
 - The United States, Israel, North Korea, France, Germany, Netherlands, Australia and Canada are among the global militaries that employ women in front-line combat positions.
 - It is the right of every woman to pursue a career of her choice and reach the top since Equality is a constitutional guarantee.

Source: TH