

The paramilitary forces have till recently, been considered a natural arena for men. Indian women were allowed to enter these professional bodies only after five decades of Independence. These forces were set up to act in the name of the authority of the State against armed groups, rioters and other disruptive elements and to uphold law and order.

Combatant women are members of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), an official paramilitary organisation of the Indian State. The first ever women's battalion, the 88 Mahila Battalion, became operational on April 1, 1987. Since its inception, the Unit has performed multifarious duties in different parts of the country and in Sri Lanka. There were at first six women officers – Anita, Rakhi, Aparajita, Seema, Anne and Usha. After the training at Mount Abu was complete they were finally sent to take charge of six companies in 88 Mahila Battalion. At that time, the total strength of the battalion was 718, including officers of different ranks. Members of the two women's battalions in the Central Reserve Police Force are the first and only women combatants in the country today.

Recruitment was made from all over India by a board of officers detailed by the Directorate General. Initially the companies were trained at different Group Centers, namely, Jharoda Kalan, RamPur, Durga Pur, Bantalab, Pallipuram and Guwahati. All the companies, after completion of basic training at six centers, were concentrated for collective training and passing out parade in January 1987 at

Humiliated Even as Soldiers

The Women's Battalion of the CRPF

○ Santosh Singh

Battalion Headquarters, Jharoda Kalan, and New Delhi. The passing out parade was held on March 30, 1987. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi took the salute on that occasion.

Broadly the role of 88 Mahila Battalion can be stated as follows::

- ➔ Providing assistance to the state administration in restoring and preserving law and order;
- ➔ Relief and rescue operation; and
- ➔ Any other duty assigned by the Directorate General CRPF.

Battalion Structure

Women's battalions are organised in ranks and protocol is strictly

observed. All the companies are headed by Company Commanders who are generally Assistant Commandants; in extraordinary situations an inspector heads a company. The Commandant heads the battalion.

The structure of the battalion is in the form of a pyramid with a broad base of operating units supporting an ascending hierarchy of sections / divisions where a single executive / commandant exercises final authority over the whole battalion.

Paramilitary women have been recruited from all ethnic and racial groups and religious backgrounds. However, the majority of them have come from what are traditionally some of the most conservative communities: middle, lower middle and rural service sector and trading and farming families. All of these women had received formal education beyond the middle level- some had crossed senior secondary school and passed college. A sizable number had graduated from university and had thus been directly appointed to the gazetted officers' category. The majority work at the constabulary level; others hold non-gazetted subordinate officers' ranks. Only a few hold Class 1 gazetted officers' rank. There is no disparity in the salary structure on gender lines. All are paid at the same



level as their male counterparts. Some of them, at all ages, in all cadres, are in excellent health; others experience a range of health problems. Some of them are content and wish to pursue careers as members of the forces; others speak of taking retirement as soon as possible.

An Informed Choice

Interaction with the women of the women's battalions gives a clear indication that they have joined not because of a lack of other opportunities or of information, but rather by making an informed choice. Since the minimum age prescribed for getting employment in the paramilitary force is 18 years, most of the women were young. About 95 per cent belonged to the age group of 21- 29 years and represented the first generation of paramilitary women recruited through the all India level test. The average age of the women was 30 years. The majority of the women were from Uttar Pradesh followed by Kerala, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Delhi, Bihar and Assam.

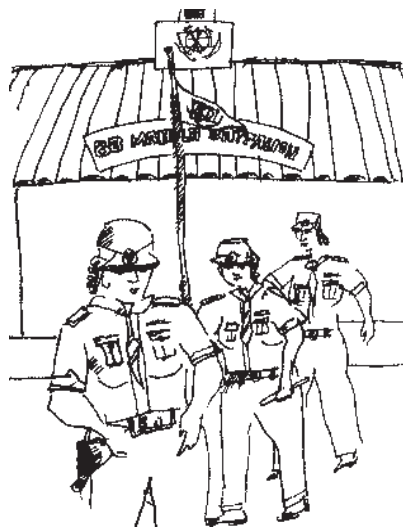
Debate on women's role in the paramilitary setup has often focused on problems created by the growing participation of women in riots and insurgencies. However the 88 Mahila Battalion is itself treated as a problem for the organisation. Therefore the experiences and expectations of paramilitary women require examination. My research indicates that female combatants' experiences of the paramilitary force has often been demoralising and worrisome, and is at best unsatisfactory.

Treated with Contempt

The whole set-up of the 88 Mahila Battalion reflects a patronising attitude on the part of men, bordering on contempt, towards female combatants. First, female

gazetted and non-gazetted officers / junior cadres and other ranks are addressed as "ladkiyan", (girls) irrespective of their age and rank by their male counterparts, whereas male officers do not address their male colleagues as *ladke* (boys). They are called constables or *jawans*. Both the terms *ladakinyan* or *ladke*, subtly introduces paternalistic notions of authority into the relationship.

Second, a male Commandant, has always headed the Women's Battalion since its formation in 1987, when the first women combatants officially began to operate. Ironically



the first six directly appointed gazetted female officers too were keen to head male companies in a male battalion rather than companies in the Mahila Battalion, which they were trained for. They took up the responsibility of their companies only reluctantly. During the training period, time and again they expressed their desire to head a male battalion. They were always keen to prove themselves and felt that heading a women's battalion would somehow lower their position in the organisation and in society as well. Why? The answer lies in their socially conditioned perceptions of

the role of women in a security force. To a certain extent they themselves were not sure of their choices and roles. Part of the answer also lies in their rage and hatred for men folk. Significantly, roles internalised by these women during training enabled them to emerge as powerful figures, confident in their ability to stand at par with their male counterparts. A female trainee explained the reason for this choice:

"Why should we join the Women's Battalion now, when we were not told to do so during our appointments? We can head a male battalion and we would like to do precisely this. For so long these men have been working with the men. Now they should work with women. Men must be sent to the Women's Battalion. Then alone would they realise their true worth. Sorry we are not willing to be part of a female herd."

Familial Equations

Third, paramilitary women are always addressed in relational terms by their male colleagues. For some, they are sisters, for others, daughters. Their occupational status and rank in the Battalion are always subservient to their gender status. However, the formal structure of the organisation and workplace do not leave any space for actually building such informal family ties and intimate bonds.

On the other hand, women too perpetuate such patterns of relatedness at their work place. Replying to a question about which male colleague will you rank the best, a majority of the women –non-gazetted personnel replied,

"So and so is a better person. He is like a father."

If the person mentioned belongs to the same age group, he is always "like a brother".

Ghettoisation at Work

Just as in other areas of their lives (domestic work, childcare, leisure time etc.) women's space is privatised and isolated, so also within the paramilitary forces. As paramilitary personnel their workspace is shrunk; their isolation is augmented by the force's culture and by the exclusive norms and practices of the paramilitary force. Paramilitary women are marginalised and downgraded through low numbers, and the overwhelmingly masculine ethos of booze parties and sexual innuendos.

Most women feel that they are discriminated against from the training stage itself; that male instructors are prejudiced against them; that they overemphasize the importance of physical strength in the job and generally ridicule women for not having enough physical prowess; that they try to exclude women from risk zones and frequent movements; that they do not accept women as full and complete members of the organisation or as colleagues on an equal basis.

"Either they are overprotective like knights in shining armour during operations or they are just against us."

The perception of men in the paramilitary reflects gender bias and prejudices. Their hostility is reflected in comments made by them such as the following remarks made by a senior commandant posted in the Group Center at Jharoda Kalan :

"They are aware that they are desirable, and that provokes them to behave abnormally and each and every move of a male colleague, howsoever well intended, is often looked upon with suspicion. The problem of these women is primarily the problem of identity confusion. They wish to perform as males and desire to be treated as males, which is neither correct nor possible. A man at best would like

to be treated as man, similarly a woman should seek to be treated as a woman. This earns her great respectability which she can command only as a woman. Indira Gandhi never tried to act as male, therefore, she attained a status par excellence which men must envy for all times to come and for the women of India, a watermark, a skyline to reach."

One more example of a similar type of response comes from a Deputy Inspector General:

"Often these females in competitive areas of common operation would like to be and



demand to be treated equal to males for fair distribution of resources, goods and services but, as soon as a question of a favour arises, they would like to be treated as weak and tender females, constitutionally different from their male counterparts. Ironically such occasions in working situations are many."

Some other officers described the 88 Mahila Battalion as a "Token Battalion." For some it is a "Petticoat Battalion" and for others a "Ghagra Battalion".

Such arguments against women as coworkers are expressed vociferously and routinely.

The following incident narrated by a female Deputy Commandant serves

to illustrate what kind of environment women have to function in and endure : "It was December. By evening I reached Mount Abu-Internal Security Academy- my destination. My father came along with me. I was guided to the Gazetted Officers' (GOs) Mess called Jodhpur House. Before having dinner my father and I were taking a stroll near the main gate of the mess. There was a lot of hustle and bustle in and around the mess as newly recruited GOs (called DAGOs-Direct Appointed Gazetted Officers) were arriving and arrangements were being made. My father was wearing a black suit and a yellow tie with red dots. Suddenly, I overheard something really offensive. "The old man has come with his daughter. She has become an officer so to make an impression the old man has purchased a new tie to go with the old shoes and his antique suit. A new tie was probably all he could afford." I immediately turned to see the speaker- a fair complexioned middle-aged man with black moustaches with a smirk on his face. Next day I found that he was to be one of my course instructors. This was the beginning of a humiliating relationship."

A female sub-inspector had this to say :

"My colleagues and I faced a typical male mentality- 'Oh! What can these females do?' (*kya karenge yeh jananiyan?*). Actually most of the time we were objects of their amusement. Our instructors, course-in-charge, seniors, juniors, nobody took us seriously."

A female Assistant Commandant related the following incident:

"My senior asked me to join him for an evening walk. We are not

supposed to say no to our seniors. On that day the walk, continued for three hours. Next day again he asked me to join him. The conversation began on a formal note, but gradually turned into a personal, informal chat. At times his gestures made me uncomfortable. Then his utterances became too personal. Then, he started talking like an infatuated person. I had to tolerate his offensive behaviour, just because he was my senior.”

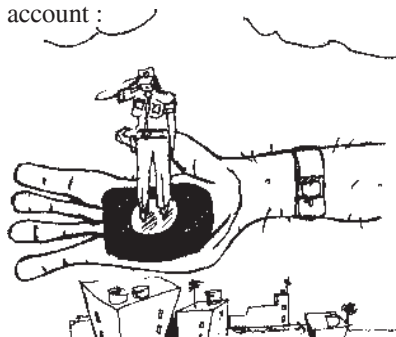
Woman after woman spoke of the pettiness, spitefulness, hostility or, at the other extreme, icy indifference exhibited by male colleagues and seniors. Most of these women suffered from a deep sense of humiliation.

An extremely disturbing incident concerns the sexual harassment of a beautiful female recruit by a very senior officer. He pressurised her in every possible way, making full use of his position, rank, and authority. The woman passed many traumatised days and nights but did not bend before him and in her own way created obstacles for him. For that she paid the price too. She related the following: “We female trainees were allotted rooms in an officers’ mess, specially meant for formal dining. There was no provision to accommodate trainees in that mess. We learnt that later. There were only five or six rooms, which were meant for senior guest officers and guest speakers. For long term trainees there were two separate messes. But he was a very senior officer, so he had the authority to bend the rules. Even the rooms were allotted by him only. He himself was putting up in the adjoining suite. Daily late at night he used to knock on the common door between his and our suite, which was always

closed from our side. We used to spend whole nights wide awake and terrified. But we could not reveal this to anyone in the training institute for two reasons: first, he was a very senior officer and nobody would have believed us; second, in that strange and unfamiliar environment, we ourselves did not trust a single soul. Hence silence was the only option.”

I found that the vast majority of women were not willing to report wrongs committed against them by male colleagues in the Battalion.

One woman gave the following account :



“He was a Deputy Commandant in my Battalion. At that time we were posted in Meerut. His wife was pregnant. He already had two children. His wife had gone to her in-laws for the delivery. He asked me to stay late in the office. He asked me to do ‘batman’ duty in his house in the absence of his wife. He always used to praise my big eyes, whenever he found me alone doing sentry duty. At one point of time he threatened me with dire consequences for refusing his advances.”

She did not report the matter to anyone, simply because she was very scared of him and also afraid of losing her job. She also suffered from a sense of inferiority and low self esteem due to her lowly position in the Battalion ; she was a mere constable. Neither could she muster up enough courage

to share her problem even with her close colleagues.

Does it mean that male personnel always have their way in the Battalion? That is fortunately not true. What happens is that men try to manipulate things in subtle and covert ways. The organisational, moral code actually dictates behaviour patterns and demands a certain level of discipline. The result is that there are relatively few violent crimes against women in the Battalion. However, male power over women does not always result in physical violence; it is visible in subtle forms such as catcalls, offensive comments or gestures, which have the capacity of damaging the self-esteem of women. Women feel confused and do not know how to respond to such acts. Generally they do not report the matter to any authority, viewing it as the single greatest risk to their jobs. Women of all ranks echo this factor.

To quote :

“ During the training period one of my friends came to visit me. I was sitting in the mess with him and chatting. There were others also sitting there. Still my instructor came over only to me and gave me such a dirty look as if I was committing a heinous crime. I want to emphasise that that mess was meant for receiving visitors and for socialising. I wanted to ask that instructor whether he had ever acted in the same manner when a man came to meet a male recruit. That was a case of mental violence.”

I found that problems related to fertility and childbearing also became a subject of ridicule and satirical comment among male paramilitary personnel. A male officer expressed his disdain thus:

“One after the other there is a queue for maternity leave. If you do not give them leave, they start crying. The Women’s Battalion is

not only a burden but it is also a sick women's unit. Half of the Battalion's strength is on leave for childbirth. After availing maternity leave, the problem is not solved. Then they need leave on the pretext of child care."

Male officers often also make insulting remarks about the appearance and physical fitness of female members of the force. In one instance a female inspector with a protruding belly was parading. On seeing her, a senior male officer said :

" Just look at this female Listen Miss A. you are the parade commander, so you must take care of your belly. All women must look smart and beautiful."

What is noteworthy is that he did not make a mockery of potbellied male colleagues who were also the part of the same parade.

Women's sexuality is treated as dangerous and threatening, but at the same time attempts are made to manipulate it to male advantage. For

example, on all ceremonial occasions female gazetted officers were once ordered to dress in sarees only, whereas their male counterparts continued to dress in their uniforms. After one or two occasions, the female officers decided that they would wear their uniform as the dress code for officers and would wear sarees only on occasions, for which male colleagues were required to wear formal attire. This decision not to allow themselves to be turned into a mere spectacle in glaring contrast to their male colleagues, does indicate that

ultimately traditional roles will be seriously challenged by women in the paramilitary forces.

At times women also align themselves with male officers and become abusive towards their female colleagues. When women themselves entrust their male colleagues with the authority of a patriarch and view them as fathers or brothers, more authority is conferred on them. The myth that women, though trained as



combatants, need to be protected and are not fit to handle jobs independently is thus perpetrated. As a result, they continue to be marginalised in the representational paramilitary structure. In one instance, women gazetted officers after taking over charge of the battalion secretly passed personal letters of their female colleagues to the Commandant of the Battalion to gain favour and get into his good books. Thus, the Commandant came to know the most intimate details of

these women's lives, which placed him in a position where he could take advantage of them.

The policy decision to recruit women is clear; that they are needed is also undeniable. However, problems were bound to arise in the functioning of Mahila Battalions because, in a single stroke, many old assumptions, attitudes, and prejudices stood challenged. Yet, the men of the force were given almost no guidance or direction as to the treatment of their female colleagues. The women were thrown in at the "deep end", so to speak, and had nowhere to go in case they faced hostility, discrimination and blackmail from unscrupulous male colleagues. Ultimately, of course, the paramilitary force is not divorced from the society in which it exists. As women are gradually finding their voices in the larger society, so will they in the CRPF. □

References

- Aggarwal, S. 1990. ' Cultural Roots of Violence on Women in India,' *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 42 (2): 170-186.
- Basham, A. L. 1995. *The Wonder That Was India*, New Delhi: Rupa and Company.
- Brock, Brigit. 1989. *Feminist Perspectives on Peace and Peace Education*, New Delhi: Paragon Press.
- Manchanda, Rita(ed). 2001. *Women War and Peace in South Asia*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Sarkar, Tanika. 1996. "Heroic Women, Mother Goddesses", in *Women and the Hindu Right*, Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (eds.), New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Sharma, P.D.1977. *Indian Police: Development Approach*, Delhi: Search.

Santosh Singh is a researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi. □