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Women in Armed Forces

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Why is in news? 'If you don't, we will': SC tells Centre to grant permanent commission to women officers in Indian Coast Guard

The Supreme Court told the Centre that **denying permanent commission to a woman Coast Guard officer** on the ground that it is "**functionally different**" from the Indian Army and Indian Navy **cannot be accepted in today's times**, indicating that the court will step in if the government fails to remedy the situation.

About the case:

A Supreme Court bench led by CJI Chandrachud was hearing the plea of **Priyanka Tyagi, a woman officer in the Coast Guard**, who was **seeking permanent commission to eligible women short-service commission officers** of the force.

The bench asked the Central government to **ensure that eligible women officers get permanent commission** in the Indian Coast Guard.

The bench also asked the Centre **to come up with a gender-neutral policy** on the issue.

"Women cannot be left out," Chief Justice of India (CJI) D Y Chandrachud said while asking the Central government to **ensure that eligible women officers get permanent commission in the Indian Coast Guard**. He further said that if the government does not do so, the Supreme Court will take the necessary steps.

"All these functionality etc argument does not hold water in the year 2024. Women cannot be left out. If you do not do it, we will do it. So take a look at that," the CJI said.

Tyagi served for 14 years and rose in the ranks from her initial appointment as assistant commandant in 2009 to Commandant (junior grade).

While dealing with her case on February 19, the court had sought the Centre's response and termed the Centre's reluctance to see women short service commission officers in Coast Guard to be "patriarchal".

"The times have gone when you said women cannot be in Coast Guard. If women can guard borders, they can even guard the coasts," and admonished the Centre for not translating talk of women-empowerment into action.

In February 2020, the top court gave a landmark ruling in **Babita Punia judgement paving the way for women short service commission officers** to be **eligible for permanent commission in non-combat streams of Army and Air Force** at par with their male counterparts.

Following this, results of Army selection board, de-classified on November 19, 2020, revealed that out of 615 women SSCOs, only 422 candidates were found fit on merits. This led to the second round of proceedings filed by Army women SSCOs before the top court.

In **Lt Col Nitisha v Union of India** decided in March 2021, the **assessment criteria followed by Army was struck down as discriminatory and based on gender stereotypes**.

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Relief for woman navy officer, the bench headed by **CJI Chandrachud used its extraordinary powers under Article 142 of the Constitution** to direct the Indian Navy to constitute a selection board to give a “third look” on the petition by a lady JAG (judge advocate general) SSC officer ex-Commodore Seema Chaudhary.

Indian Coast Guard:

The Indian Coast Guard was established on **August 1, 1978**, as an armed force of the Union.

Its mission is to **protect India’s maritime and national interests within its maritime zones**.

It enforces laws related to **customs, immigration, poaching, and pollution at sea**.

It conducts round-the-year real-life operations at sea, despite being relatively small in size.

The Indian Navy **operates globally**, while the ICG is **restricted to territorial waters extending out to 30 nautical miles** from the coast.

The Indian Navy protects Indian ships and ports from external threats, while the ICG enforces maritime laws, ensures safety, and preserves the marine environment within territorial waters.

Permanent Commission:

Permanent Commission means **having a long-term job** in the Indian armed forces until retirement.

It provides stability and a complete career path within the military.

PC officers can **rise through the ranks and attain higher positions**.

Short Service Commission:

Short Service Commission (SSC) is a **temporary service arrangement** in the armed forces.

Officers serving under SSC have a set period of time to serve, usually **around 10-14 years**.

SSC Officers **do not receive pension benefits**. This means they do not receive retirement benefits like regular permanent officers.

After completing SSC, officers can choose civilian life or other professions.

Significance of the Permanent Commission for Women:

Gender Equality: Permanent Commission for Women in the Armed Forces removes gender discrimination.

Career Security: It ensures job stability and advancement opportunities, enabling officers to make lasting contributions. It can also grant equal entitlements as men, including pension benefits after 20 years of service.

Fostering Opportunities: Ensures economic opportunities, and improves social conditions, and dignity for women.

Behavioural change in the Society: It can encourage more women to join the Armed Forces, expanding the talent pool and addressing officer shortages.

Reasons for not giving Permanent Commission to Women in the ICG:

Operational and functional Difference: As per ICG, There is a point of functionality difference as the Coast Guard functions differently from the Army and Navy”.

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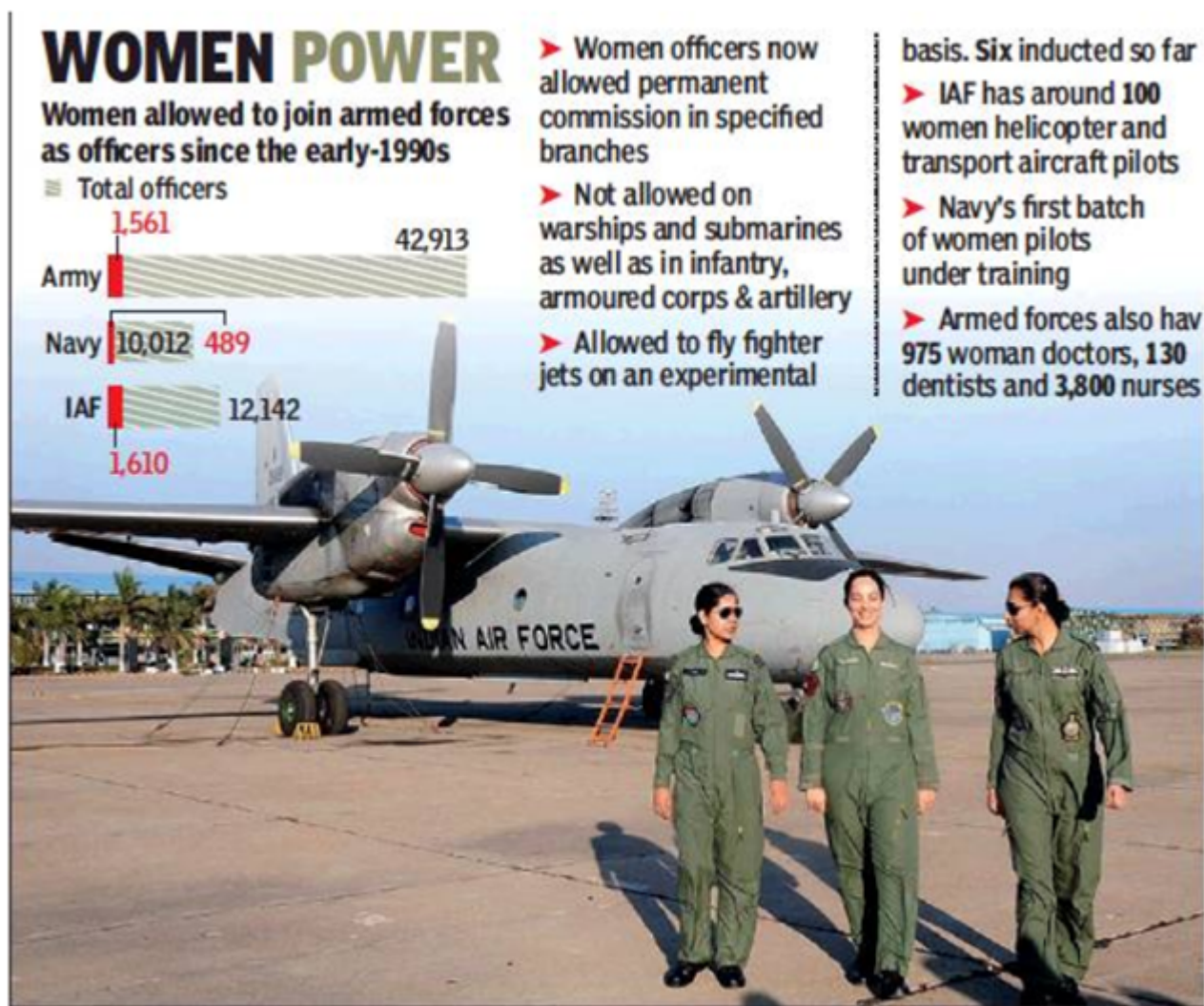
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Traditional Gender Roles: Historically, military roles, including those within the Coast Guard, have been predominantly occupied by men due to traditional societal norms and perceptions regarding gender roles.

Incorrect assumptions about physical abilities: There are some arguments that women may lack the necessary physical strength or stamina for specific roles in the Coast Guard. This viewpoint overlooks individual capabilities and unfairly discriminates based on gender.

Safety and Privacy Concerns: There are concerns about the safety, privacy, and insufficient facilities for women in combat environments



Disruption of effectiveness: Integrating women may necessitate substantial shifts in attitude among male personnel which could impact unit cohesion and effectiveness.

Current state of Women in Indian Armed Forces:

There are 9,118 women currently serving the army, navy and air force.

Women comprise **only 3.8% of the Indian army** (world's second-largest army) – **compared to 13% of the air force and 6% of the navy**.

All branches of the Indian Armed Forces have women in combat roles. Women are allowed in combat services and supervisory roles (as officers).

As of 2020, three officers have the rank of lieutenant-general or equivalent, all in the Medical Services.

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In May 2021, 83 women were inducted as Jawans for the first time in the Indian Army, in the Corps of Military Police.

Global comparison:

Israel is known for its **high representation of women in the armed forces**. As of 2021, women comprise about 33% of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), including combat roles in the air force, navy, and infantry.

The **United States** is considered a **pioneer and a trend-setter as regards induction of women** in the services. There are approximately 200,000 American women on active duty in the US armed forces. They constitute nearly 20% of its strength.

In **Britain**, today, 71% of all jobs in the Navy, 67% in the Army and 96% in the Air Force are tenable by women. Women are primarily excluded from the duties which require battling enemy at close quarters.

Examples of Women in Indian Armed Forces:

Gunjan Saxena: She is a former IAF officer who became the **first woman to fly in a combat zone** during the 1999 Kargil War between India and Pakistan.

Padmavathy Bandopadhyay: She became the **first woman Air Marshal** of the Indian Air Force in 2004.

Bhawana Kanth: In 2016, she became the **first woman to be inducted into the fighter stream** of the Indian Air Force (IAF).

Tania Shergill: She became the **first woman Parade Adjutant for the Republic Day parade in 2020**, leading an all-male contingent of the Indian Army.

Challenges faced by Women Officers in the Indian Armed Forces:

Gender Bias and Discrimination: Women face biases from male officers who question their commitment due to marriage or family responsibilities. Biases exist among both genders, affecting the perception of women officers' capabilities.

Limited Career Opportunities: Women officers have historically faced restrictions in combat roles, limiting their career advancement. The Challenges in obtaining commanding positions due to gender norms and lack of representation in leadership roles.

Work Environment Issues: Lack of gender-sensitive facilities like separate toilets for women officers at certain postings. Unequal treatment and expectations, such as proving themselves more than male counterparts for recognition is a major challenge.

Societal and Cultural Barriers: Traditional societal norms hinder the acceptance of women in combat roles and leadership positions. The need for a shift in societal attitudes towards viewing women as equals in the armed forces.

Recruitment and Retention Challenges: Recruitment and retention rates in the armed forces are affected by the lack of a strong mixed-gender force. The Indian Army's decision not to allow women in commanding roles impacts recruitment and retention efforts.