



By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA

Whither Women in Combat?

Former Goa Chief Minister ManoharParrikar, and current Defence Minister, announced at the “MAN-O-LOGUE”, organised by Rotary Club of Panaji last month that his Ministry was considering opening up combat roles for women in the armed forces. Thereafter, Parrikar confirmed that the first batch of women fighter pilots would be serving the Indian Air Force from June 2017, with the Navy following suit with combat roles for women, too.

Parrikar’s current position is a turn around from barely five months ago, when he dismissed the possibility of women as combatants by saying: “Think of what can happen if a woman is taken as a prisoner in a combat operation”. This earlier argument was akin to the idea that lampposts should not be constructed because dogs would urinate on them! One might also wonder whether rapes or sexual harassment are not otherwise perpetuated – in homes, workplaces, or just about everywhere.

And if women’s rights were indeed on the agenda, shouldn’t Parliament have scrapped the impunity available under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act to members of the Armed Forces for any crimes including sexual violence committed by them? We cannot have a situation like the case célèbre from Punjab where an IPS officer was caught bottom-pinching an IAS officer and the ‘Nation’ defended him because he was seen as our valiant fighter against terrorism.

Clearly, many of those who think women ought not to be in combat services are speaking from the mindset that women are physically and mentally incapable of such work, or are in the habit of seducing others at work, and hence are best kept at arm’s length.

It would be apt to quote a comment from the Dutch Defence Minister, a woman who, as *The Guardian* chronicles, said, “It doesn’t matter if you have a willy or not ...I don’t think the military officers that we work with see us any differently than if we were men”. “And if they do”, she went on to say, “they don’t show it. But there is a public debate about women taking

more influential political roles, and that's healthy."



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But as a feminist, I am also seized by other questions. Would we want to fight for equal rights to something we don't desire or appreciate in its present form in the first place? The devastation that the military industrial complex is causing worldwide is something increasingly hard to hide. The war machine is kept alive by the dictates of the arms industry and the power mongers of the day. War supplies, like alcohol, have a way of creating demand. The war machine is also sustained by constantly talking about the enemy next door, and the resources required to combat the enemy, which distracts from people's scrutiny of governance. In the meanwhile, resources are diverted from the much needed sectors of education, health and development.

In a sense, by entering the domain of combat, women are being co-opted into this military industrial complex. As Professor Deepti Mehrotra, a feminist writer and political scientist aptly puts it, "Women are getting trapped in different ways by violent, hyper-masculine, patriarchal, capitalist, militaristic, exploitative ideologies and structures. It is painful to me to see women becoming aggressive, militaristic, exploitative, super-bossy, money-crazy, power-crazy; losing capacities of caring, creative skills, life-enhancing attitudes and commitments. I see it every day.

Women joining male soldiers in fighting and killing are logical in the continuum. We need to have and to focus on alternative feminist paradigms of liberation/ empowerment/ full humanity."

There may be another way of looking at it. Europe now has five women Defence Ministers, and their tweet which made waves about a year ago, read: "Ironically I do think that having this group of female defense ministers can only prove constructive in the Ukraine case. From experience, women tend to find a more reasonable approach and could de-escalate the rising tension."

But different women have different political approaches and practices and not all women are

peace-loving or will do things differently, when in hitherto male bastions. One has seen or read about the active roles played by women in communal riots, for example.

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So, how can we uphold women's rights to equality and non-discrimination, while at the same time, not getting sucked into the military model of development? Our response cannot but be strategic and nuanced. If we uncritically acclaim the opening up of combat roles for women, what we are in effect doing is also simultaneously endorsing the war machine and the war mongering. If we oppose the combat roles only when it comes to women, we are lending ourselves to the charge of stereotyping women's capacities and roles.

How about simultaneously engaging with a vision of women, men, transgenders, all, hammering swords into plowshares and laptops and spears into fishing hooks?

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