Permanent Commission to Women Officers in Army

Why in news?

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has issued the formal Government Sanction Letter for grant of Permanent Commission (PC) to women officers in the Army.

What is a Permanent Commission?

- A Permanent Commission (PC) means a career in the army until one retires.
- If one gets selected through PC, one has the option to serve the country up to the full age of retirement.

What is the government's order?

- The government's order specifies the grant of PC to Short Service Commissioned (SSC) women officers in all the 10 streams of the Army in which they presently serve.
- The same procedure for male SSC officers will be followed for women to give PC.
- The order follows a Supreme Court verdict in February 2020.

What was the Supreme Court verdict?

- About 322 women officers had approached the apex court on the issue of PC.
- The court directed the government to ensure that women officers, irrespective of their years of service, are granted PC in the army.
- The issue of command postings came up in the discussion on subsequent avenues after the grant of PC.
- In its appeal, the government cited “physical” and “physiological limitations” in granting command positions to women offers.
- To this, the Supreme Court said there was need for administrative will and “change of mindset” in this regard.
- The court thus added that the woman officers would be eligible for command posting.
- The SC bench observed that there could not be absolute exclusion of women officers for command assignments, and that they should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Why is this significant?

- The Army is often seen as the preserve of men.
- But enough women have fought heroic battles to bust that myth.
- From Rani of Jhansi in the past to Squadron Leader Minty Agarwal of the Indian Air Force, there are many to cite.
- [Minty Agarwal, in 2019, was part of the team that guided Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman during the Balakot airstrike carried out by the IAF.]
- But the battle to break a gender stereotype and provide equal opportunities for women in the Army had to be fought right up to the Supreme Court.
- The government initially did not take serious a Delhi High Court ruling in the litigants' favour 10 years ago.
- Then in the Supreme Court, the litigants concerns were evident with the views expressed by the government.
- The government pointed at "physiological limitations" of women officers.
- These were cited as great challenges for women officers to meet the exigencies of service.
- But this misogyny was called out by the Supreme Court, which directed for equal treatment.
- Given this past, the present decision will go a long way in ending a prejudice associated with the Army.

What is the way forward?

- Elsewhere in the world, in countries such as the US and Israel, women are allowed in active combat.
- In India, the Supreme Court had to forcefully nudge the government to make women's role in the Army more inclusive.
- Of the 40,825 officers serving in the Army, a mere 1,653 are women.
- The overall percentage of women at all levels of the armed forces needs to be increased.
- To usher in a change in a regressive mindset prevalent in the society, a lot more must be done on gender sensitisation.
- A gender barrier may have fallen, but the war against inequity has a long way to go.

Source: The Hindu

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