Women-In-Command in Indian Army

Why in news?

As many as 108 women officers in the Army are set to be cleared for the rank of Colonel (selection grade) by the Special No 3 Selection Board.

> *A total of 60 affected women officers have been called as observers for the Selection Board to ensure fair conduct.*

What does this selection mean?

- This selection will make these women officers eligible to command units and troops in their respective arms and services for the first time.
- A total of 244 women officers are being considered for promotion against the vacancies - from the batch of 1992 to 2006 - in arms and services.
- [The arms and services include Engineers, Signals, Army Air Defence, Intelligence Corps, Army Service Corps, Army Ordnance Corps, and Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.]

What is the selection procedure?

- The Special No. 3 Selection Board is the promotion board that promotes the women officers from the rank of Lieutenant Colonel to Colonel.
- Unlike other promotion boards, this selection board is being held every day for a particular batch, starting with the 1992 batch, and the results are being declared on the same day.
- Every officer gets three chances for promotion and thus the reviews, too, are being held within three days of the declaration of the result.

Why is this significant?

- It grants women officers parity with their male counterparts.
- Earlier, with a limited period career in the force, there were no promotion avenues for women officers to become a Colonel and command a unit like male Army officers.
- In the past, women officers reached the rank of Colonel or beyond but only in two branches where they were granted permanent commission in 2008. These two branches are
    - the Judge Advocate General (JAG) branch and
    - the Army Education Corps.
- However, these were staff appointments - which are more administrative in nature - and not purely command appointments in which an officer commands troops on

ground.

The Supreme Court's order to grant permanent commission to women Army officers in February 2020 opened the doors for promotion to women officers across all streams of the Army, except pure combat arms.

Why did the Colonel promotions of the women officers of the batches as early as 1992 batch come so late?

- An officer in the Army is promoted to the rank of Colonel only after serving between 16 and 18 years, based on certain criteria such as annual confidential reports and various courses.
- Women officers who were inducted into the Army were inducted as Short Service Commission (SSC) officers in 1992 and in the years after did not have the choice to opt for permanent commission.
- The JAG and Army Education Corps were exceptions, where a permanent commission was opened for them in 2008.
- For other arms and services, women had to retire much before they completed the service period that is mandatory to become a Colonel.

What did the Supreme Court order in 2020?

- In 2019, the Army changed its rules allowing SSC women officers to opt for permanent commission who would have otherwise retired after 14 years of service.
- However, this was not retrospective, and applied only to the batches of women officers starting their career in the Army in 2020.
- With the Supreme Court judgment of February 2020, permanent commission was granted to women officers with retrospective effect.
- This opened the doors for a longer career for women officers in the Army, and made sure they will be considered for promotions, including to the rank of Colonel and beyond.

What exactly does commanding a unit mean?

- Once promoted to a Colonel, an officer is eligible to command troops directly in the Army, which is an acknowledgment of the leadership qualities of the officer.
- It is considered a coveted appointment because in no other rank - including higher ranks like Brigadier or Major General - does an officer interact directly with troops on the ground.
- For a woman officer, this is an empowering move as it will give them an opportunity to prove their leadership skills.

In which arms and services will women officers command units?

- Women officers in Army streams of Army Air Defence, Aviation, Signals, Engineers, Electronics and Mechanical Engineers, Army Service Corps, Ordnance Corps, and Intelligence Corps - will be commanding units.

- They are still not eligible in core combat arms such as Infantry, Mechanised Infantry and Armoured Corps, as the Army is not open to women fighting wars at the borders as foot soldiers.
- However, the Army has recently decided to open the Corps of Artillery, a combat support arm, to women.

All major countries including the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, and Israel, allow women in command positions of their national armed forces.

What about the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force?

- Women officers have been inducted into all branches of the Navy, and they will be eligible for permanent commission in the future.
- Women officers can command shore-based units and, as they join the service and become eligible for permanent commission, they would be able to command ships and air squadrons.
- The IAF has opened all branches for women officers, including the fighter stream and the new weapon systems branch.
- As they are granted permanent commission based on eligibility and vacancies, they will be eligible to command units in the future.

The Army, being the largest of the three services, has the largest number of women officers at 1,705, followed by 1,640 women officers in the IAF, and 559 in the Navy.

Reference

1. The Indian Express | Women get command roles in the Indian Army
2. The Hindu | Women officers in command soon
3. NDTV | 108 Women Army Officers To Be Promoted To Rank Of Colonel For Command Role

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