



Women in sky-blue: An engineer's experience

Yes, Sir or Yes, Madam?

The 'flying wing'

Nabhah Sprusham Deeptam - Touch the sky with glory:



The motto of the Indian Air Force evokes a great sense of pride, patriotism and humble veneration of all things airborne, be it a soaring bird, a trail blazing jet or a rocket reaching out to the heavens. The blue uniform is very familiar in these parts, but few can ever understand or appreciate the spirit contained therein. When the early 1990's saw the entry of women into the non-medical, frontline arms of Indian Defence: the Army, the Navy and the Air Force, it marked a milestone in progressive Indian thinking. There has been a continual waning of interest and respect perhaps due to decreasing awareness about the fighting arms of the country's defense, over the years, among the general public, Kargil notwithstanding. As in many other walks of life, there is a dismal gender inequality in terms of sheer numbers. Whether it was a question of the right form of address, or being considered mantelpiece objects, to more serious issues like fitness for fighter aircraft duties, it has been a continuous organizational groping in uncharted waters. Without any attempt at feminist gimmicks, I present here a few experiences of an early engineer-entrant in that scenario, having seen six years of active Air Force life.

I miss my uniform!



Ever since I joined here in NAL as a Council employee, there has been the daily question of what "main" and accessories to wear, and how to wear your crowning glory, as many here may experience. What bliss, when one had just to don the blue uniform, or an overall, and the cap over neatly put-up hair!

Yes, Sir or Yes, Madam?

Then there was the question of being addressed, which is not trivial when one is in uniform. Sensible work-minded personnel continued in their stride, addressing the new entrants "Sir". A jobless few preferred to debate the gender-specific forms "Sir" and "Madam". I wonder now whether a decade has been sufficient for the Force to make up its mind.



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Round Pegs and Square Holes

We were 'L' (Electronics) engineers and 'M' (Mechanical) engineers (the former far outnumbered the latter); our duties at any unit (generic name for any Squadron / Wing / Station / Depot) were clearly defined. The personnel with 'L' background may find themselves say in the battery charging room, or the signals section, or the Radar section etc, and their 'M' counterparts may take charge of the transport section, the Armoury and the like. One of the places for the 'L' people is the Photo Section, somewhat similar to a part of the Graphic Arts section here. A bright peer came up with the (unsolicited, Bollywood Johnny-style) suggestion: "Put the girls in the Photo section; *expose bhi ho jayegi, develop bhi ho jayegi*".

GI Joe's influence?

A few weeks after I commenced work here, I came to know about the perception a few had on hearing that a person with military background was likely to join NAL. It appears that a gun-toting female was expected, perhaps in battle fatigues? Would that I could get back into those blues! (Wishful thinking: would they fit?).

Of civilian luxuries...

What a luxury to find Ladies Rooms - tiled and well-lit ones at that - here! It took my second place of posting, five years and an evidently growing waistline before it was brought home to the then Commanding Officer that this species of officers were humans too; 'major works' (military parlance for Estate and Building activity) services were sanctioned thereafter. One humbly hopes these luxuries are ready on date.

.... and civilities

When the organization insisted on adding extras to our names, as in Flying Officer (Mrs / Ms / Miss) X, when male peers would be just Flying Officer Y, up went the 'fairer' arms in protest. The fiasco ended with the choice left to the typist! I had mixed feelings, however, during an out-station duty in Bangalore. On arriving at the HAL guest house, I found excellent accommodation arranged - to be shared along with three male colleagues - it appears that "Flying Officer R Swarnalatha", carried in the written request for accommodation, was not clear enough in its gender.

A Flight Lieutenant signing off...

Not for the entire world would I exchange those precious years, and memories, and experiences. JFK may have said:

"Ask not what the country...", I can say that I have done my bit for the nation.

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