

Role of women in 1971 Indo-Pak war: The story of Bhuj airbase

Kartikey Sharma¹, Dr. Jyotsna Sinha²

²Supervisor

^{1,2}Doctoral programme (English)

^{1,2}Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology, Allahabad, Prayagraj

Abstract:

The primary objective behind writing this paper is to highlight the role of women in serving the nation at the time of war. We have come across many examples of women displaying their capability in various fields such as education, science, social work, medicine and trade but it would not be fair to ignore their role in the field of defence. The security of our country is a responsibility which is shared by both men and women. The hands that can bake bread also know how to defend the motherland. On the night of December 8, 1971, the Pakistani Air Force bombed the Bhuj airbase of IAF. The combat planes were unable to take off due to the heavily damaged airstrip and this posed a major threat to national security. Due to the shortage of labor and paucity of time, Squadron Leader Vijay Kumar Karnik, who was then in-charge of the Bhuj airbase, took the decision of taking help from the locals of Madhapur village for the task of rebuilding the airstrip. Fortunately, Mr. Karnik succeeded in persuading 300 women of the village and as a result of their tireless efforts, the airstrip was made operational within the stipulated time of 72 hours. This is one of the finest examples of women power that made the country proud. Following the reconstruction of the airstrip, fighter planes successfully took off and heavily bombarded the enemy side, leading the nation to a marvellous victory. The Government of India honoured these brave women for their indomitable spirit with a cash prize of Rs 50000. In 2018, a war memorial named *Virangana Smarak* was dedicated to these lionhearted women of Madhapur village of Bhuj. This proves that women can indeed do wonders if they are given an opportunity.

Keywords: War, Defence, National security, Bhuj Airbase, Vijay Kumar Karnik, Madhapur, Virangana Smarak.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Thatcher, also known as the Iron lady, once said “**If you want something said, ask a man. If you want something done, ask a woman.**” These words not only highlight the importance of a woman, but also show the level of a woman’s determination. A woman should not only be seen as a housewife since it would undermine her stature, rather she should be viewed as someone who has tremendous energy and enthusiasm to do jobs that are exclusively meant for men. In this era of woman empowerment, women are scaling new heights in various fields, be it engineering, education, healthcare, trade or the armed forces. Kalpana Chawla became the first Indian woman in space, Dr. Kiran Bedi made a mark in the area of administration by getting the car of former PM Indira Gandhi towed away as it was parked at the wrong place, Flight Lieutenant Gunjan Saxena bravely carried out sorties during the Kargil war and decimated the enemy, Arunima Sinha climbed the Mount Everest with an amputated leg and hoisted the Tricolor and Israel defeated the Arab forces many times because of her gallant women pilots.

The great Rani Padmini committed *Jauhar* or self-immolation to save her honour, Panna Dhai sacrificed her only child named Chandan to save Udai Singh II, the son of Maharana Sangram Singh. The fearless

Hadi Rani beheaded herself in order to inspire her husband to go to the battlefield and Joan of Arc led the French army to a decisive victory over the English. These are not mere examples of woman power but also the supporting pillars of humanity. History is full of many such extraordinary women who have made unforgettable contributions and served mankind selflessly. Let us not forget the diligent women tea-pluckers who work hard the whole day in tea plantations of Assam. Women are also guarding the frontiers of our country holding rifles and making the country proud.

Every year, girls outshine boys in the board examinations and make their parents proud while simultaneously negating the notion that girls should not be sent to school. Our society hence, must do away with the ugly mindset that supports gender discrimination. Just because of her sex, the girl child is not allowed to see this beautiful world which is in-fact beautiful because of her. But things are changing today and strict laws have been enacted to monitor female foeticide.

In 1971, Pakistan attacked India. The airstrip of Bhuj airbase was destroyed by Napalm bombs dropped by the PAF. But thanks to the strong-willed women of Madhapur that the airstrip was made operational again after 72 hours of anxiety. It was due to their extreme love for the country that these women completed such an arduous task despite the risk of life.

BHUI: THE STORY OF INDOMITABLE SPIRIT

Famous Hindi poet Dushyant Kumar has penned a famous line which says **“Who says that the sky cannot be drilled, just throw a stone friends with full enthusiasm.”** This is not just the line of a poem but something that can make the impossible possible. The Bhuj incident is an unforgettable part of our history since it throws light on the determination and high-spiritedness of the brave women of Madhapur village. These women could have very easily shied away from the job of reconstructing the airstrip but they didn't. This is so because the soil that produced them had instilled in them extraordinary enthusiasm and inspiration to serve the motherland at any cost. It therefore becomes important to highlight the role played by these women in fighting for the nation.

The whole story began when the Sabre jets of PAF dropped Napalm bombs on Bhuj airbase, rendering its airstrip inoperable. The whole nation was looking eagerly at the Indian Air Force for any possible solution as it was a time of utter chaos and danger. The IAF approached the BSF for taking up the task of repairing the airstrip but since the labourers were less in number and time was running out, Squadron Leader Vijay Kumar Karnik approached the villagers of Madhapur. At first, nobody was willing to assume the responsibility of restoring the airstrip but when the village *Sarpanch* Jadhavjibhai Hirani, personally requested the women to do the repair work, they agreed.

So, the work of reconstruction began. A siren alerted the whole team whenever the enemy jets hovered over the airbase. The women were given pale green sarees to camouflage themselves. They used to immediately stop working and hide behind bushes whenever the siren blew. The enemy planes would come at any time to play the spoilsport but thanks to the tireless efforts of the women that the work did not stop. In an interview with *The Times of India*, Viru Lachhani, one of the brave women of Madhapur village said:

“We were instructed to cover the strip with cow dung to camouflage it from the enemy's planes. While working, we had to scurry for shelter in bunkers at the sound of siren. Taking shelter in bunkers during air strikes, we had to survive on Sukhadi and chilli.”

On the first day, the women had to sleep hungry as there was nothing to eat. Fortunately, on the second day, fruits and sweets were provided to the women from a local temple. The airstrip became ready for use

on the fourth day and at 4 P.M. sharp, the first combat plane took off. It was a proud moment for the whole country when the hard work of the brave women of Madhapur yielded amazing results. One of the women named Valbai Seghani had a son who was just 18 months old when she left him under the care of her neighbors to do her bit for the country. These are the examples of sacrifice made by women who considered national interest more important than their own interests.

The women of Madhapur, even today have not lost the vigor and energy to serve the country. Valbai Seghani, in an interview to Ahmedabad Mirror, said

“I am only 74 and I can serve my soldiers and my country again if they need me. Pakistan should know that we are not born to be defeated.”

Valabai Seghani also emphasized on the fact that Pakistan would have annihilated Kutch if they had not repaired the airstrip on time. How tough it is to work day and night with death flying just above the head can be well understood through this story.

The attack on Bhuj airbase is compared to the attack on Pearl Harbour following which, the US entered the Second World War. Behind the success of every man, there is the hand of a woman and in this story, behind the success of a country the woman played a pivotal role and made an indelible impact. These women are the true source of inspiration for the present-day generation and their story must be read and told again and again. Nowadays, women soldiers are actively guarding the frontiers of our country armed with AK-47 rifles, keeping an eye on every movement of the enemy. This shows the valor and confidence of women, those women who know how to defend themselves when it comes their self-esteem.

It becomes important to teach the children of today’s generation about the bravery of the women of Madhapur, so that they too should be able to stand up for their motherland in the time of crisis. This is not just a story but a lesson which the whole world can learn. We should be proud of the women who without any second thought, decided to put at stake their own life.

Our culture worships woman power in the form of Goddess Durga as she is the symbol of power and prestige. The trident which she holds shows that no sin ever goes unpunished. Similarly, when girls join the Police or the armed forces, they do so out of their love for the country and not for sake of earning money or medals. Women, although look soft from outside, yet when the question of showing courage comes, they come forward with full confidence.

Rani Lakshmbai strapped her son on her back and valiantly fought against the British army which proves that Indian women know how to take care of their children even at the time of war. Bina Das, one of the revolutionaries from Bengal, attempted to assassinate the Governor of Bengal Stanley Jackson who luckily escaped unhurt. Das was later on sentenced to a rigorous imprisonment of nine years. The fictional character of Devi Chaudharani, from a famous novel of the same name written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, also fought against the tyrannical British rule. Even in post-independence era, we come across many such examples of bravery and patriotism. In the Kargil conflict of 1999, Flight Lieutenant Gunjan Saxena of IAF successfully inflicted heavy damage on the enemy side. Dr. Kiran Bedi got the car of former PM Indira Gandhi lifted as it was parked at the wrong place.

Joan of Arc was a woman for whom nothing was more important than the pride of her country. She bravely led the French army to a marvelous victory over the English and had her name written on the pages History in the letters of Gold. Rani Durgavati of Gondwana, in a battle which she lost to a Mughal General Khwaja Majid Asaf Khan, stabbed herself instead of getting caught by the enemy. Florence Nightingale, also

known as “The Lady with the Lamp” served as the manager and trainer of nurses during the Crimean war, in which she organized care for wounded soldiers at Constantinople.

The Virangana Smarak is a war memorial dedicated to these brave women who fearlessly performed the task of restoring the airstrip. It reflects the adversities that those women had to face when there was no other alternative than to boldly face danger. It is said that three years after the 1971 war, when the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi offered gifts to the women of Madhapur for their patriotic deeds, they very simply rejected the offer saying that what they did was for their country and they did not want rewards for that.

CONCLUSION

Indeed, the women of Madhapur played a role which cannot be explained in just a few pages. It takes a lot of courage to even think of performing a task as tough as reconstructing an airstrip and that also in wartime. We should be proud that we are born in a country which has produced great women like Sita, Kunti, Draupadi, Rani Padmini and Rani Lakshmbai who are the epitome of bravery and selflessness. No country can progress in an ideal manner if the women of that country are not given their due. A woman is one who can play multiple roles and bring immense pleasure. She makes the world colorful by virtues such as patience, endurance, creativity and optimism.

A woman is one who holds the whole family together and endures all kinds of sufferings to ensure the welfare of family. Before a child is born, the mother undergoes a lot of pain but feels happy on seeing that her child is born healthy. A woman should therefore, be respected for all the sacrifices that she makes. The great deeds of the women of Madhapur village during the Indo-Pak war of 1971 will never be forgotten.

The story of brave women of Bhuj is soon going to be portrayed in a movie titled **Bhuj: The Pride of India**, in which Ajay Devgan has essayed the role of Squadron Leader Vijay Kumar Karnik.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. <https://www-thebetterindia-com.cdn.ampproject.org>
2. <https://m.timesofindia.com>
3. <https://www-shethepeople-tv.cdn.ampproject.org>
4. <https://dubate-com.cdn.ampproject.org>
5. <https://www-aahtak-in.cdn.ampproject.org>
6. <https://www-mensxp-com.cdn.ampproject.org>