

India's Wrongful Feminization of the India-Pakistan Conflict 2025

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A Failed Attempt at Framing Symbolism as Strategy

The brief yet intense India-Pakistan modern day conflict of 2025 marked the beginning of a new age, changing the chaotic geopolitical history of the South Asian region for times to come.¹ India waged a war against Pakistan based on sheer assumptions following the Pahalgam terrorist attack on the tourists on 22nd April 2025.² Although Pakistan had offered to carry out independent investigation³ on the matter in order to debunk this blame game, it was not welcomed by India. This shows just how institutionally immature the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is. Instead of tackling the problem with maturity and clarity, Indian government started a false narrative, blaming Pakistan for its internal problems, eventually leading to a diplomatic deadlock.

The Indian government started a media-centric rhetoric, based on cultural symbols and superficial nationalism. Some examples include the deliberate displaying of a female officer from Muslim minority background, referring to its failed military

operation as "Operation Sindoor", and actively assigning female officers to carry out press briefs. Underneath this planned façade, there is a serious ethical issue: in an attempt to showcase to the entire world that India is inclusive with its military institution, it undermined the very people it was showcasing and exposed them to extremism and real-life backlash from its own sexist and Islamophobic citizens.

An Overview of Rights of Women and Children during Conflict

The value that has been almost universal throughout the history of warfare, from ancient rules to contemporary international law is, the protection of women and children. The 1949 Geneva Convention and associated Additional Protocols place a strong emphasis on protecting civilians during armed conflicts, especially women and children.⁴ In the theater of war, women—especially those in visible or symbolic roles—are usually protected, not paraded, especially during or immediately after an offensive act.

'Operation Sindoor': War Wrapped in
Cultural Gendering

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The BJP's decision to call its unprovoked and unjustified attack against Pakistan "Operation Sindoor", was far from innocent. 'Sindoor' is basically a vermilion cosmetic powder that represents married Hindu women at the time of marriage.⁵ It is deeply embedded in the Indian culture and gender norms. Its connotations are that of marriage and womanhood—ideas that hardly can be associated with war or conflict. It should be known that when strategic language is replaced with religious metaphors, policy collapses into a spectacle.

Following the Indian strikes on 7th and 8th of May, 2025, New Delhi hosted a number of press conferences, with female officers from Indian armed forces being the most prominent ones rather than generals or politicians.⁶ From the surface, this looks like India is highlighting the roles of women in its defense system, but this carefully scripted visibility soon turned into vulnerability.

In this specific case, choosing to put forward female officials, one of whom was Colonel Sofiya Qureshi, belonging from Muslim community was celebrated initially as a symbol of the so called modern India. However, it soon became the target of vile threats and media scrutiny. The public enthusiasm soon turned into skepticism over Operation Sindoor's effectiveness because of the rising success of Pakistan's counter attack in self-defense, 'Operation

Bunyan-ul-Marsoos'.⁷ ⁸ Colonel Sofiya, who had been elevated initially by the Indian media was now left exposed to anger and religious extremism by her own fellow citizens. One extremist Indian official referred to her as "the sister of terrorists",⁹ some accused her of treachery, and questioned her devotion to India. Her religious identity which was once misused to foster harmony is now being held against her.

A Misuse of Representation

The choice to wrongfully feminize war, both through the use of rhetoric and personnel representation, sets a dangerous example, causing real women to suffer from its consequences, one that stems from religious extremism. India turned this nexus of geopolitical event into a platform for superficial patriotism, undermining the real issue at hand—presence of militancy inside India, cross-border tensions, and its own internal religious extremism. In an extremist state like India, women's protection becomes insignificant when they are exploited as political symbols rather than respected professionals. It is noteworthy to question where were these women-led press conferences when the tourists in Pahalgam were attacked? Nevertheless, the state of India provided no visible support for Colonel Sofiya once its narrative began to fall apart. In an attempt to project gender and religious inclusion for pretense, the

Indian government structure failed to safeguard the very people it put on display.

Conclusion: The Real Face of Operation Sindoor

In wrongfully naming this failed military campaign after a symbol of womanhood and then failing to protect the women when the political tide shifted, India turned its own officers into sacrificial lambs. The misuse of this feminine imagery backfired miserably. It was never meant to empower women in the first place, it meant to manipulate public perception and then

went down in flames to protect the very woman it exploited for symbolism.

This war did not just challenge borders—it challenged the ethics of representation. In future conflicts, India and other states should not focus on how women can be used to sell wars, but how they can be first protected in their own country. Until then, Operation Sindoor will remain less a story of national valor and more a cautionary tale about the cost of symbolic warfare—borne by the very women it claimed to honor.

Notes and References

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