

## The Silent Strength Behind the Uniform: A Study of Major Priya Semwal in Swapnil Pandey's *Never Give Up*

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### Abstract

The Story 'Never Give Up' from Swapnil Pandey's *The Force Behind the Forces* is an inspirational account of the bravery of Major Yuri Semwal's wife, Major Priya Semwal, who refuses to be rattled by tragedy and society to become India's first army officer widow to join the Indian Army. This article examines her life from a twin research lens of emotional resilience and gender lens, showing how she turns internal grief into public service. Priya's is not only a story of what's lost, but also of what remains, an act of seizing some agency in a place where patriarchal mores have historically reigned supreme. As she slides into a uniform that her husband, Naik Amit Sharma, once donned, she subverts the clichéd image of widowhood and, in doing so, also reinstates how the spouses mourning behind the curtain of grief are not passive carriers of sorrow, but active agents of change and strength. The paper offers a critical analysis of emotional resilience as an empowering strategy among army wives. The study, by way of experiential life, explores the psychological endurance that is needed to cope with grief, societal expectations, and the asylum of the armed forces. It is also a meditation on the way that gender roles are both reinforced and upturned in military life, particularly in the wake of a soldier's death. *Never Give Up* is ultimately a story of strength and transformation that rewrites the army wife identity as active and leader-full, not only present, but moving onwards. This paper attempts to study the larger discourse about gendered resilience, widowhood, and invisible but influential contributions of wives and military husbands to national service. This study contextualizes Priya Semwal's narrative.

**Keywords:** resilience, tragedy, strength, patriarchy, service. uniform, leadership, widowhood

### Introduction

When people think of bravery, sacrifice, heroism, and all the terrific elements of the military, we tend to think of those in uniform. Yet the lives of military spouses, and especially army wives, are largely absent in literary and academic texts. These faceless warriors are what Swapnil Pandey's *The Force Behind the Forces* bring to the fore, *Never Give Up* is a story of that indomitable human spirit of one such woman and tale of her indomitable courage to not give up, and make it come out as a victorious shout screaming from the confines of her soul, to resonate the entire country simply by sacrificing her pain and agony at the altar of ambition of a successful life lived by the norms of the society even in adversity. This article analyzes how emotional resilience serves as the foundation for Priya's transition from grieving widow to empowered warrior. It also explores the gendered discourses of widowhood in Indian society and the military, where women should withdraw into silence and men should remain within a curtain while still in mourning. The emotional and social life of army wives is focused on; this includes what happens when their husbands die while on duty. Though the term "brave" is used everywhere, the reality of losing your spouse in the military is much more than just bravery. Kind gestures and rituals mark a journey of loss, feeling lost, financial struggle, and feeling pressured to keep going. Looking at the theme 'Never Give Up,' the study attempts to present society's expectations and these women's genuine courage.

The study considers, from a gendered angle, the responsibilities of army wives to be the emotional support of their military families as well as partners to their soldiers. The results also make it clear that widowhood isolates individuals from the military world and makes them work on rebuilding their lives, which strongly influences their sense of belonging. By

reading feminist writings, scholarly works, and the stories of survivors, we learn that most of them survive despite, not because of, the help they get. The book ultimately encourages readers to see how complex and challenging it can be to be the one managing the forces. It asks the business world and society to do more than make empty promises and help people affected by war in meaningful ways, even after the battles have ended

.People in India consider Swapnil Pandey a national bestselling author, who is known for her well-researched books about the hardships and efforts made by Indian Armed Forces members and their families. Her most notable books are *Balidan: the stories of Para Special Forces*, *The Force Behind the Forces*, and *Soldier's Girl*, all designed to encourage people to appreciate and understand the military community. Swapnil had been trained at Birla Institute of Technology, Mesra, and later joined Wipro and HDFC. She has worked as a teacher at Lovely Professional University and the Army Public School. *Soldier's Girl* and *Love Story of a Commando* are the best-selling novels of Swapnil Pandey.

### 1. Traditional Ideas and Requirements for Army Wives

Many feel that, in Indian society, army wives support their men in the military from the home front. Although women are often highlighted in historically significant speeches, their accomplishments often remain unnoticed in everyday conversations. Far from choosing who she is, an army wife's identity is given to her by being a wife, a supporter, or a person who stayed home while her spouse served. The nation is seen as strong and beautiful in entertainment, but these views usually do not come up in serious policies, books, or films. Throughout history, what they are expected to do involves sacrifice, strong emotional work, and perseverance. They are required to do the following:

- Look after household duties by oneself for a long period.
- Raise their children mainly by themselves because their partners offer very little help.
- When struck by tragedy, make sure to grieve correctly and hold your emotions together in any public setting.

Rather than considering such restraint to be repression, it is celebrated as something patriotic. As a consequence, army wives look after things in the family, but their dreams or personal experiences are often ignored. At first, Priya Semwal shows what it means to never give up. After hearing about Naik Amit Sharma's death, she feels sadness as well as poise. Nathan first suggests she will be a helper at home, but her joining the army instead shows how much she has grown.

### 2. Patriarchal views regarding Widowhood

As there are patriarchal customs in India, a woman is identified mainly through her husband, and his death is supposed to symbolize her death. Though the country ended sati and mandatory seclusion by law, women are still looked down on if they display any signs of emotion.

**There are many things expected from a widow, including:**

- Wear garments that are clean and solidly colored, such as white.
- Avoid joining in any public celebration or party.
- Keep your emotions in check or keep them low.
- Give all of her attention to remembering her husband instead of looking for new interests in love.

When it comes to being part of the army as a wife, she has to meet additional, rigid expectations. The fact that their husbands died for the nation means that widows represent the sacrifice of the larger community. All her days are suspended in time, dedicated to the person who sacrificed his life for the country. Patricia Uberoi, in *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India*, argues that Indian familial structures are based on "patrilineal honour," where women are socialized to suppress personal ambition and accept dependency (Uberoi 1993). During difficult times, such as when they are widowed, women usually find themselves returning to their husbands' or fathers' homes and having their status reduced.

### 3. Priya Semwal's Silent Shattering between Rituals and Ruin: A Soldier's Last Goodbye

A crushed and grieving Priya sat at an awkward angle, jammed into a small corner of the room. She was forcing herself to face the people around. There was an ocean of them. It was the funeral of a soldier killed in action after all. Naik Amit Sharma, the lad who had been killed in action, was the pride of the family. The atmosphere was mournful. Female relatives were howling and tearing their hair. Nothing mattered now, not even her existence. She wanted to lie down and mourn in

silence, away from all the people, but it was not possible. She had to sit there and be tagged as a 'bechari'. As Patricia Uberoi suggests in her introduction, widowhood in India entails not only emotional loss but also a deeply embedded "cultural burden" (Uberoi xii–xvi). The comments made by the people depicted the same social and cultural burden.

The room filled with voices that grew with intensity.

"The poor woman is a widow now. What will she do with the money?"

"She is been widowed so young. She has no father to turn to either. As she has a little daughter besides. Nobody should have such a fate. Poor woman."

"Mother and daughter are both widows. What a horrible destiny." (p. 81) Often, society's comments, meant maliciously, can seriously hurt a woman's spirit, especially if she is already going through a painful loss. Even so, Priya continued to face their difficulties quietly. Every upsetting thing she heard was a result of a woman who was already dealing with losing her identity and feeling grief. She felt like a part of her life was gone because of her husband's death. Many believed that after her husband's passing, she became nothing but a widow, and her own life and feelings had become irrelevant. Meanwhile, below that quietness, a human being was inside, struggling hard to be calm, rubbing her hands to hide the anxiety and avoid any further storm.

#### **4.. Priya Semwal: Feminist Resistance Through Trauma**

Priya Semwal's choice to become a soldier goes against the usual cultural expectations of women. After being quiet for some time, she once again speaks her mind. Her decision to enter a traditionally male organization is especially significant, since she takes it over after her husband dies, so she becomes more than just a character in a uniform. Her experiences point to a bigger feminist push for Indian women, as they show that widowhood can be a chance to move ahead, find their place, and serve the community with strength and pride.

Chandra Mohanty says, "Women's suffering has long been used to justify their silence. But suffering can be a catalyst for resistance, and trauma a site of power."

Mohanty discusses how trauma and suffering can become sites of resistance. Priya's grief becomes a source of agency, rather than submission, and she reclaims identity through joining the army.

Priya Semwal's decision to join the army breaks the customs observed when a woman's husband dies in India. She decides not to act like a passive and sad widow, but uses her losses to make positive changes. In her research, Uberoi states that it is the powerlessness of the widow, among other women, that causes her to be revered as the ideal in Indian culture (Uberoi 112).

Priya does not fit into the role of the traditional planner, so she rediscovers who she is through what she does. Her decision to put on her husband's uniform shows how trauma motivated her to become a feminist, rather than keeping quiet as silence has done for other women. That's why, despite her suffering, Priya shows strength, female pride, and a reborn spirit.

Priya started thinking of the SSB exam. She felt the society would not let her live with dignity otherwise. In jobs that focus on constant connection with others, like caregiving, customer service, or military work, staff are usually asked to cover up their true feelings so they look caring, compassionate, or cheerful. This hidden aspect of work, which is called emotional labour, can tire people and make them feel less human. Arlie Hochschild's book mentions this well when she claims that "Emotional labour has the characteristics of a commodity, putting workers in the same vulnerable and lonely position as those in the classic political economy" (The Managed Heart 7). In this line of thinking, Hochschild claims that emotions that were private before are now used as part of a commercial exchange. An employee's personal life is now under the control of the company and is often used to help the organization grow. This concept is very important for women whose jobs require them to keep strong even with personal suffering or loss. Their ability to handle emotions well is necessary, but it is sometimes ignored.

Supported by her brother Col Arun Aggarwal, Priya understood during that tough period that her only option to claim her dignity was to complete the SSB test. Part of the reason was to preserve the dignity of both her mother and daughter and move forward with what her marriage represented. According to Priya Semwal, this problem was about pride. "When a woman's husband dies, people stop seeing her as a person. They see only her white sari. It's like you're already half-dead." (Lamb, p. 145.)

She was recommended, but now her medical examination on 27<sup>th</sup> November would be the deciding factor. And on that basis, she was rejected. The medical officer went through her kidney reports, which said she had once been operated on for kidney stones.

Her brother, Parvesh, cried before him, ‘Sir, this is for the first time that a Jawan’s wife has come so far. Because of one decision of yours, she won’t be able to achieve an extraordinary feat. Please don’t do this.’ The medical officer would not listen. He said, I am just following the rules. Please try next year.’ Every tear Parvesh shed pierced Priya’s heart. If there was anything she was left with, it was only her pride, and she saw it getting tossed away mercilessly. She held her brother’s hand and dragged him out of the doctor’s room. Once outside, she called the Commanding Officer, Arun Aggarwal, whose support and encouragement were the reason she had appeared for the SSB exam in the first place. She was crying. From the other side of the STD phone, he said, ‘Never give up! How many times do I need to tell you never to give up? Priya? You have made it so far. I am, you will make it. You are a brave woman. You have faced things you were not supposed to face, this is nothing. You know, when I told people about your selection, everybody laughed at me. They said an OR’s wife could not be an officer. You have to prove them wrong. Go back to the guest room and meet the Commandant tomorrow evening. Tell him about yourself.’ (p 94-95)

It was indeed right about people taking Priya casually. Gerda says, “The widow was often viewed not as an autonomous being, but as a remnant—defined by the man she lost.” (*Gerda Lerner*-1986) Never before had a jawan’s wife donned the uniform. It was heartbreaking when Priya was offered the Commandant’s PA’s job. Priya said, I’m not standing before you for a job. I have an MSc in Mathematics; I have a B.Ed degree. I have cleared CTET and every other teacher-eligibility test out there. If I want employment, I will get it in any test out there. This is not about employment. Rather, it is about pride and dignity. I want to carry forward the legacy of my husband, who lost his life for the nation. Hope you understand this.

In traditional societies, after her husband passes away, a woman tends to become less known and end up with a restricted role. Usually, rather than valuing what she can do, she is considered reliant on others for her social and economic well-being. In *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Martha C. Nussbaum claims that widows are usually cut off from their rights to property, looked upon as dependents, and believed to be unsuitable for public service in a variety of countries. It expresses that widows are subject to poverty for both legal and cultural reasons, which take away their control over their lives. People who see widows as incapable of doing tasks, looking after their belongings or running their lives place them outside the normal workforce. Women are still excluded from society, which adds to existing gender inequality in places where their identity depends on their husbands. This commodification of emotional labor reflects how the military institutionally relies on the emotional work of women, both in combat zones and on the home front, without necessarily providing adequate support or recognition.

Priya was eventually cleared by the medical board at R & R New Delhi, and all the Generals and Brigadiers congratulated her wholeheartedly. By the end of the term, Priya and two other Lady Cadets were the only ones to clear ATP ( All Test Pass) at their first attempt. Lady Cadet Priya Semwal had improved her fitness and her performance. She had earned her well-deserved Coy Sergeant Major ( CSM) appointment in the senior term on her merit. Priya, in one of her interviews, said, “ I am proud of my training. I have achieved what I wanted. I have broken barriers against all odds because I wanted to prove that women are not a weaker gender. I hope my story will inspire women all across the country to have faith in their capabilities. The OTA has trained me well, and now I am no more a “bechari” for anyone. Never give up .” (p.107)

Her story is based on interviews with Mrs Vishaka Semwal, mother of Priya Semwal; Col Arun Aggarwal, the then Commanding Officer of the 14 Rajput; She achieved a feat almost impossible at that time. Today, we see many war widows joining the Forces, and very few of them come from an NCO background, but back in 2012, it was unheard of. It was only because of the Commanding Officer, the 14 Rajput, who believed in progressive ideas and encouragement, that a Jawan’s wife could join the Forces. Today, many Commanding Officers of the Indian Army are following in the footsteps and investing their efforts in enabling war widows to achieve something in their lives, which is a great societal change in recent times. Now Priya commands respect from thousands of men serving under her. The grief that she hides is invisible until you dig deep and reach those emotions that make her a woman just like any of us. (p.108)

The concept of emotional labour, introduced by Arlie Hochschild, is also central to understanding the life of an army wife. While soldiers face physical risks, their spouses often manage the emotional burdens of fear, absence, and uncertainty. After a husband's death, this emotional labour intensifies — as these women are not only grieving but also expected to be strong for their children, Arlie Hochschild says “Emotional labour requires one to induce or suppress feeling to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.” her in-laws, and even their communities. There is little space to be vulnerable.” In her foundational work, *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild defines emotional labor as the process by which individuals manage their emotions to fulfill the emotional requirements of a job. While Hochschild primarily discusses this in the context of service industries, the concept extends to the roles of military spouses. Army wives often find themselves managing their fears and anxieties to provide emotional support to their families and communities, especially during deployments or after the loss of their spouses.

## Conclusion

The study has focused on the feelings and experiences of army wives, mostly after the loss of their loved ones on active duty. Many in our culture honour women as brave and resilient, but the reality for army widows is much more involved. The rituals and platitudes on show represent the path someone takes through losses and identity changes, financial condition, and a need to remain strong. Working under the title “Never Give Up,” this research explores how the phrase reflects both what society expects from women and what they do. According to a gendered perspective, the study examines what is asked of army wives since they serve both as the emotional grounding for the family and as partners to the service members. Widowed persons are separated from the military community, suffer another loss, and must adjust their lives alone, which often makes them feel unsettled. All the information, including feminist ideas, ongoing research, and their individual stories, explains that these women usually cope due to a lack of choice, not outside support. Swapnil Pandey’s *The Force Behind the Forces* includes the journey of Major Priya Semwal, who proves to our society that nothing can stop a strong-willed person like her. It explains how she overcomes her experiences and chooses to help her nation. While Priya’s story shows her dealing with loss, it also demonstrates how she has restored her sense of control in a setting usually only ruled by men. Wearing her husband’s uniform, Naik Amit Sharma shows that people in her position can be active and supportive, rather than only feel sad and depressed. She sets an example of perseverance and determination, never giving up, regardless of the situation.

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