From Silver Screen to Home Front: Challenging Civilian Misconceptions of Military Life with Narratives of Army Wives

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Abstract:

Cinema has long served as a powerful medium through which Indian society engages with national and military narratives. Many popular Indian war films create exaggerated and romanticized images of the armed forces, which affects how civilians view the military and often overlooks the real experiences of military families. That is why this paper examines the portrayal of Indian Army wives in Border (1997), RRR (2022), Sam Bahadur (2023), and Amaran (2024). Drawing on feminist cultural theory, analyzing how militarized narratives frame army wives through themes of sacrifice, emotional endurance, and support. While earlier films depict women as passive figures of waiting, recent portrayals increasingly acknowledge their agency and emotional labour. By placing cinematic representation in dialogue with lived narratives, this paper highlights the gap between reel-life constructions and everyday realities. So, while we protect the nation at the border, it is really the work of army wives that supports it at home.

Keywords: Indian cinema, Army wives, Militarized nationalism, Emotional Labour, Military domesticity, Gender and Militarism, Representation, Lived Experience.

Article History: Submitted-29/01/2026, Revised-19/02/2026, Accepted-22/02/2026, Published-28/02/2026.

INTRODUCATION

Since the 1850s, the big screen and television have helped people learn about the events happening around the world. Additionally, they have created space for socialization. But at what cost? The cinemas, which were previously inaccessible to a large segment of the population, have, in our contemporary scenario, become an everyday, conveniently accessible resource (A. Joshi). Against this background, there is the creative, free mode of portraying cinema that, when depicting stories about the Indian army or the Indian military, often takes on four standardized characteristics: overly patriotic, glorified, hyper-masculinized, and romanticized narratives. Although nothing is wrong with depicting stories according to one's own artistic freedom. Nevertheless, if the same creative freedom breeds misconceptions, preconceived notions, and skewed judgments of the outsiders, then, in a way, this freedom of expression is erroneous (Singh).

Then who is to say what is right and what is wrong? For this reason, one can easily find numerous secondary-source articles from newspapers that address the same issue, discussing how Indian cinemas have delivered stories over the years, as expressed by the Indian army personnel themselves. Additionally, despite the norm for filmmakers to request a no-objection certificate (NOC) from the Ministry of Defence, cinemas still often struggle with realism, distorted portrayals, or even insulting ones, and often even being extremely wrong in the basics, such as uniforms, insignia, and official references (PTI). That too, in this age of knowledge and accessibility to information at the fingertips, and despite military consultancy in cinema, armed forces advisory support, organizational mediation in cinematic representation, authenticity training, and embedded military expertise. Hence, despite the military–entertainment complex that is the systematic cooperation between the military and the

entertainment industry, which began in WWII, later evolved into a structured relationship in the post-war era, 2000s onwards, significant change is not yet evident (Mirrlees).

Although the intention of this paper is neither to dwell on the historical context of Indian cinema nor to provide a critical summary of the same, but it seemed important to provide this context before delving into the primary goal of examining popular Indian cinema productions from different film industries: Border (1997) and RRR (2022), alongside Sam Bahadur (2023) and Amaran (2024). However, at this juncture, one might question why specifically these films and not others? Also, where do army wives appear within these movie narratives? The answer to these questions is highlighted within the critical portrayal of Indian army wives, particularly in the film 'Border,' which often serves as a focal point for criticism. Additionally, 'RRR' addresses the colonial perspective of these narratives.

As for the other movies, the author has included them at her discretion to facilitate, contrast, and support the portrayal of army wives with a real-world perspective, gradually moving from the dormant to the active side of army wives' lives. Against this backdrop, this paper goes beyond a general critique of militarized cinema to focus specifically upon the gendered dimensions of representation, with particular attention to the figure of the army wife. Also, by contrasting popular cinematic narratives with qualitative insights drawn from the author's existing academic research, together with secondary sources, and lived accounts. This paper intends to uncover the dominant portrayals that either silence, marginalize, or, in recent instances, reconfigure the subjectivity of Indian army wives. Subsequently, the following section outlines the methodological framework that leads this analysis, and the paper then proceeds to a critical examination of the selected films, one by one, to trace continuities, shifts, and contestations in the representation of army wives within Indian cinema.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

For this paper, the author adopted a qualitative, interpretive research approach, grounded within secondary data analysis, to critically examine the cinematic representation of the Indian army wives in Indian films to represent convergence and divergence in connection to the lived realities of the military families (Alase; Eatough and Smith; Robinson and Williams). So, instead of basing this paper solely on primary data, it used multiple layers of primary and secondary sources to facilitate comparative and reflexive analysis. Furthermore, the fundamental material for this paper were the Indian films, namely: Border (1997), RRR (2022), Sam Bahadur (2023), and Amaran (2024). Further, these films were included for their cultural visibility, historical significance, and differing portrayals of military life, with particular emphasis on the wives of Indian army personnel. Moreover, this paper approached Indian military films as cultural texts and narratives, analyzing them through close reading, thematic representation, and representational critique, while drawing solely on qualitative narratives to contextualize and complicate these cinematic portrayals. Additionally, the analysis of these films is supported by secondary-source materials, which include the following:

- Cinematic misrepresentation concerns that were expressed and raised in articles and media commentaries, as in secondary sources.
- Articles and Books on gender, militarization, army wives, and media representation from primary sources.
- Qualitative narratives and interpretations derived from interviews and engagement with army wives and families, comprising the author's ongoing PhD dissertation data.

Furthermore, when analyzing Indian military films as cultural texts, it was beneficial to utilize tools from feminist literary and cultural analysis to explore narrative construction,

symbolism, and representational politics. Thus, the aim was to identify recurring motifs such as sacrifice, silence, emotional labor, authority, and agency. Likewise, by placing these cinematic depictions in dialogue with the author's PhD data, this paper adopted secondary qualitative synthesis, enabling a nuanced comparison between the reel-life construction and real-life experiences. In this regard, the methodological approach used in this paper moves beyond evaluating the films exclusively on their realism or accuracy. Rather than focusing on a single aspect, this work explores the ways in which meaning is generated, disseminated, and established. Furthermore, regarding ethical implications, the qualitative stories presented in this paper were sourced from the author's current PhD research, for which all participants provided informed consent prior to data collection.

In addition, to safeguard participants' confidentiality, their identities have been kept anonymous and represented by pseudonyms. Moreover, the information gathered is for academic use only, and precautions have been taken to ensure that no identifying details or institutional information are shared. Additionally, this methodology facilitates the critical examination of how cinema contributes to shaping civilian perceptions of military life, particularly the often-overlooked subjectivities of Indian army wives. Hence, guided by this qualitative, secondary data-based approach, this paper will, in the subsequent sections, proceed towards the critical examination of selected Indian films, analyzed individually to trace continuities, shifts, and contestation in the representation of army wives within Indian cinema. The sequential analysis enabled a close reading of each film while situating it within broader cultural, gendered, and militarized narratives.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION IN THE USE OF AI

During the drafting of this paper, the author utilized AI-assisted digital tools in a limited capacity for non-substantive purposes. In this context, Grammarly and Microsoft Copilot were

utilized for grammar correction, language refinement, and improvement of the coherence and structure of the author's original writing. In addition, ChatGPT was used as a supplementary aid during the phase of literature search to identify relevant secondary sources. Nonetheless, the paper's conceptual framing, analytical interpretations, selection of sources, and writing remain solely the author's responsibility.

ARMY WIVES IN INDIAN CINEMA

- Awaiting Sacrifice: Army Wives in Border (1997)

Renewed discussions around the Border movie (1997) have resurfaced in contemporary discourse following the announcement of its sequel in January this year. This film can be seen as a significant cultural gem that reflects the anxieties, aspirations, and ideological climate of late-1990s India. Likewise, in line with hegemonic militarism, Border portrays the military organization as the natural bearer of national virtue, honor, and unity (Singh). Nonetheless, this film showcases a remarkable level of technical accuracy in its portrayal of uniforms, insignia, weaponry, and military logistics, authenticity that can be credited to the involvement of active military personnel and veterans, as well as support from the military organization during its production. However, despite this technical realism, a persistent and widely noted limitation of the film is its gendered representation, particularly in the portrayal of army wives, mothers of serving personnel, and romantic partners. Against this backdrop, these women were rendered mainly passive, their subjectivities condensed into emotional waiting and silent endurance.

This representation is most poignantly articulated through the song "Ki Ghar Kab Aaoge", which visually and narratively frames these women as figures of longing, grief, and suspended lives. While the emotions conveyed in these sequences were not, in themselves, inauthentic, the problem lies in their narrow representation as this film reduces women's experience to

sadness and waiting, overlooking the everyday realities of army wives' experiences (Sapra). As in practice, women married to serving personnel continue to sustain households, raise children, pursue careers, cultivate social networks, indulge in hobbies, and negotiate daily routines that extend beyond their emotional distress (Dandeker et al.; Sharma). Particularly within cantonment spaces, army wives form strong community ties of mutual support, shared responsibilities, and coping strategies that rarely find representation on screen (Trail et al.). Also, from a gendered analytical perspective, central to this paper, Border reinforces a worldview in which women sustain the nation through emotional labour while men defend it physically.

Therefore, emotional endurance is normalized as the feminine duty, further reinforcing patriarchal norms embedded within militarized nationalism. In this way, the army is depicted as the nation's protector and moral center. At the same time, the sacrifices made by women are relegated towards an invisible, naturalized, and unquestioned role. Wherein, army wives are shown as sacrificing family life, physically and emotionally, not by choice, but by virtue of their relational proximity to uniformed male subjects (Wharton). Such portrayals risk generalizing and normalizing these limited perspectives within the civilian imagination. Moreover, this representational pattern is evident not only in popular cinema. However, it is also widely examined in academic literature, where army wives are frequently framed as supporters, mourners, caretakers, and moral backdrops within nationalist narratives (Blaisure et al.; Eran-Jona; Leyva). Namely, to challenge this cinematic reduction, this paper draws from qualitative fieldwork narratives where participant Papa reflects:

“Because he has always lived in the Northeast, in Manipur… when my children were young, my parents didn't let me go. When my children grew up, due to their studies in Delhi and other places, we stayed behind.”

Papa's account emphasizes the gendered dynamics of mobility within military families. Her excerpt demonstrates that spousal separation is a negotiated process shaped by generational authority and children's educational pathways. Research indicates that military families experience alterations in their home environments when a family member is deployed (Dandeker et al.; Blaisure et al.). These alterations often result in increased caregiving responsibilities for women. In this instance, Papa's decision to remain behind exemplifies a form of decision-making referred to as constrained agency, implying that she is making choices within specific limitations. So, her choice to stay is not merely passive; it involves a deliberative process. Furthermore, her narrative highlights the unseen support system of labor that upholds the military organization. As Wharton points out, emotional labor is normalized as a feminine duty, especially in settings where masculine heroism is publicly celebrated (Wharton).

In accordance with the concept of militarized nationalism noted by Singh, film, such as Border, exalts the sacrifices of soldiers while rendering the administrative, emotional, and logistical efforts of spouses largely overlooked (Singh). Papa's narrative challenges this hierarchy by illustrating that the sustainability of military service relies on women's ability to navigate a dispersed family life, a topic also explored in empirical studies about the adaptation of army wives (Rosen et al.). Similarly, “Delta” elaborates on the responsibilities she assumed during her spouse’s service-induced absence:

“See, if there is happiness, there is sadness… like if we didn't have uncle with us, our children were small, we had to face it alone. As I am from… women don't especially leave their homes and step outside, but here I had to because I was now alone and had to take on the responsibility and the practical needs of my kids. Like going out to buy groceries, traveling to

the kids' school, and so on. So, we have to face a lot of problems. But we stayed together. There was happiness, and we had some problems to bear with it..."

Delta's testimony illuminates the restructuring of gender role under the conditions of spousal absence. Research on role overload and provider-role attitudes demonstrates that prolonged separation compels army wives to assume dual responsibilities (Helms et al.). In Delta's situation, tasks that appear ordinary, such as mobility and coordination of education, reveal a shift in how gender is understood. Moreover, given her background, where the women's movement was limited, her ability to move freely represents a significant transformation. Also, Delta's insistence that "there is happiness" alongside hardship challenges the usual way wives are depicted in popular movies. Instead of focusing only on grief, she shows emotional complexity, strength, and the power of community. Also, research on army communities shows that army wives create support networks that help them feel less isolated and solve problems. However, these connections are often missing in films that focus more on dramatic moments than on everyday life.

Collectively, Papa and Delta's narratives change how we usually view women in the context of military nationalism. Although research has pointed out military wives as supporters, mourners, and background figures in national stories. However, the personal accounts discussed here reveal that lived experiences are complex, active, and shaped by larger social factors. Therefore, unlike Borders' focus on longing and sacrifice, these narratives represent army wives as important figures who keep families together, navigate mobility, and maintain emotional stability in challenging situations. Therefore, their work, whether practical, emotional, or organizational, is integral to military readiness, even if it often goes unrecognized. By highlighting their experiences, this analysis challenges the view of army

wives as mere symbols of patriotic sacrifice. Instead, it shows them as active participants in military life.

- Colonial Authority and Extravagant Privilege: Army Wives in RRR (2022)

RRR functions as a larger-than-life cinematic spectacle in terms of scale, aesthetics, and antagonists, privileging over mythic exaggeration of historical realism. Although the film's global popularity brought renewed attention to anti-colonial narratives, it simultaneously attracted criticism, particularly from sections of the British press, for its purported exaggeration of brutality and caricature of colonial officials. Moreover, central to this critique was deemed the portrayal of Lady Scott, described as historically distorted (ABP News Bureau; Tombs). However, upon closer engagement in historical and academic literature, this claim becomes complex, further revealing that RRR's depiction of colonial military wives draws on from well-documented imperial practices. Since the film foregrounds two contrasting figures of colonial femininity, Lady Scott and Jennifer, whose representations invite comparison with historical accounts of British women in colonial India (Barr; Casey; McInnis). In addition, Victorian writings by British women in India, particularly memsahibs, reveal that elite colonial wives occupied positions of exceptional visibility and ceremonial authority. In The Memsahibs: The Women of Victorian India, Pat Barr recounts Emily Eden’s elaborate lifestyle:

“Emily set extremely high standards in the matter of comfort and certainly every effort was made to reproduce in the alien environment some similitude of dear Home. The burdened beasts carried tables, chairs, cupboards, beds, cushions, mats, dressing-cases and trunks filled with books, linen and tableware which were all arranged in the tents before luncheon each day.” (Barr 25)

This passage shows how British domestic life was intentionally brought into the fold of colonial space. This can be seen as domestic imperialism, where the household symbolizes the empire. Hence, by recreating comfort, order, and proper behavior in colonial settings, the superiority of the empire is highlighted. In this context, the visual richness around Lady Scott in RRR, her fancy dress, the grandeur of Government House, and the formal displays of power reflect historical acts of imperial performance. Barr also points out that ceremonial exchanges, spectacles, and gift-giving were crucial for justifying British rule. This is to say, elite colonial women were not peripheral to these rituals; they were integral to the aesthetic and social communication of imperial power. In this regard, their comportment, hospitality, and social management reinforced racial hierarchies and stabilized colonial authority.

For this reason, Lady Scott's visible dominance in RRR condenses what would describes as the symbolic and performative labor of memsahibs. However, beyond spectacle, colonial women were also active participants in governance. Verity G. McInnis's study of army officers' wives challenges the assumption that they merely accompanied their husbands:

"In feminizing the Army's ranking system, officers' wives appropriated and wielded male authority. Military homes—a space where class, race, ethnicity, and gender intersected—functioned as operational sites of empire." (McInnis 378)

Here, domesticity becomes administrative terrain. The military home operates as a site where imperial hierarchy is enacted and enforced. McInnis elaborates:

"Both these women officially adjudicated on imperial matters and issued orders. Clearly, the Burra Mem did not simply grace her husband's arm at society events but appropriated male space to wield imperial authority—a negotiated gendered authority fully acknowledged by the British Army." (McInnis 395)

These observations allow Lady Scott to be read not as an aberration but as the embodiment of militarized femininity, a form of gendered authority aligning with, and reinforcing, imperial governance. McInnis further underscores:

"Whether wearing uniforms, lecturing strikers, or issuing official orders, these women crafted and wielded very real power." (McInnis 408)

On the other hand, Barr's reference to Emily Eden's remark that Government House was "one of the few houses in Calcutta where they are not beaten" (Barr 14) reveals the normalization of coercion within colonial domestic regimes. Such documentation complicates claims that Lady Scott's violence is purely cinematic invention. Rather, one would claim that RRR intensifies historically grounded practices of racialized control, translating archival evidence into dramatic form. At the same time, colonial femininity was not monolithic. Since historical accounts acknowledge figures such as Fanny Parkes, whose writings reflected curiosity and a degree of cultural engagement, complicating a singular reading of memsahib identity (Barr; Casey). Subsequently, this heterogeneity finds cinematic resonance in Jennifer's portrayal.

Unlike Lady Scott's overt authoritarianism, Jennifer appears emotionally responsive and comparatively restrained. However, her relative empathy does not detach her from imperial privilege. Instead, she represents the moderated form of complicity within the same structural order. Thereby, expanding the representational frame from passive waiting (as seen in Border) to gendered authority within empire, RRR contributes to a broader trajectory in Indian cinema's engagement with militarized femininity. While the film concerns colonial rather than Indian army wives, it foregrounds a crucial thematic shift: women in militarized contexts are not merely emotional adjuncts but function as visible agents of structural power. Thus, RRR does

not deviate from the broader argument of this paper. Instead, it reinforces it from another historical vantage point, staging colonial femininity as a participant in imperial domination.

- Visible Partner: Social Belonging of Army Wife in Sam Bahadur (2023)

Sam Bahadur attempts to capture the larger-than-life persona of Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw. Nonetheless, it offers a grounded and nuanced portrayal of military life at home. In doing so, the film presents a relatively authentic and empathetic depiction of the life of an army officer's wife through the character of Mrs. Siloo Manekshaw. Wherein, her portrayal as a supportive partner, one who understands the demands, uncertainties, and disruptions inherent in military life, foregrounds her resilience, adaptability, and emotional strength. Moreover, the film conveys how acculturation within the military gradually shapes the role of an army wife, endowing it with a distinct social identity that commands respect, authority, and responsibility within the armed forces' organizational framework (Tkachuck). Nonetheless, attaining and sustaining this stature is neither automatic nor effortless.

In this regard, alongside the spouse in uniform, army wives are required to internalize a set of expectations and obligations that extend beyond the private domain. In this case, the film reflects on reality by depicting Mrs. Manekshaw's acceptance of frequent transfers and prolonged separations, which are presented as integral features of military life. Notably, the film underscores an often-overlooked truth that the army wives' understanding of their spouses' professional and emotional world is deeper and more intricate than one might think (Mamgain; Nair). This aligns with insights from Western military sociology, which highlights that military wives serve as the primary source of emotional support. They are often the first to notice any physical or psychological distress in their spouse in the military (Sogomonyan and Cooper).

Hence, beyond emotional support, the film gestures towards the social dimension of the army wife's role, an aspect which is frequently misunderstood or trivialized in popular discourse. Also, conventional cinematic and popular representations have long perpetuated the notion that army wives merely dress elegantly, attend parties, and engage in leisure activities. Nonetheless, Sam Bahadur complicates this assumption by situating social events within the organizational logic of culture. Although such gatherings may appear recreational on the surface, they serve critical functions. Historically rooted in colonial practices, these events continue to operate as mechanisms for building camaraderie, easing professional stress, facilitating the inclusion of new members, marking farewells, or sustaining collective morale (Lidder).

On the other hand, from an insider perspective, participation in these social practices is far from optional. The organisation symbolically and implicitly links personnel's professional trajectory to the family's integration and visibility. In this context, army wives are expected to maintain a certain standard of appearance, comportment, and social knowledge, ranging from etiquette or table manners to familiarity with ranks, uniforms, insignia, and regimental customs appropriate to specific occasions (Mamgain). Similarly, these expectations transform social participation into a form of labour that is both gendered and organizational. Moreover, to substantiate these observations, the following verbatim narratives of participant Echo's reflection offers insight into the dynamic and context-dependent nature of the army wife's role:

"We always… After my wedding, we always lived together…I had my responsibility. But we used to move, wherever he went, we used to go…But yes, there are a few stations where I had to start running from morning onwards. That was a different thing. So, that way… What you had asked me…So, daily routine depends on the place where you are. Some places, you are a unit officer's wife, itna responsibility nahi hai aapka? or you haven't been given any, you

know, task. Like, when you are, like, in center mein, please look after the welfare, or the club, or the school, or something like that…." (Echo)

Echo's account reveals that the army wife's identity is neither static nor uniformly structured. Her daily routine and scope of responsibility shift according to posting, organizational context, and organizational demand. In this context, mobility is not simply geographic relocation; it produces varying degrees of formal and informal obligation. At certain stations, her role may remain limited to household management, while at others she may be entrusted with welfare oversight, club management, or school-related responsibilities. These fluctuations underscore that the army wife's labour is contingent upon rank, location, and organizational expectations, reinforcing Leyva's observation that military spouse experiences differ significantly across contexts (Leyva).

Moreover, Echo's statement that "daily routine depends on the place where you are" highlights the adaptive capacity embedded within this identity. Unlike civilian domestic life, which may allow relative continuity, military domesticity requires constant recalibration. The wife must quickly adapt in new social hierarchies, establish support networks, and understand the expectations attached to her spouse's position. This process reflects organizational acculturation (Tkachuck), wherein the spouse internalizes military structures not through formal instruction but through repeated lived transitions. Additionally, her second excerpt further illuminates the subtle pressures of visibility and representational expectation:

"And the challenge is, yeah, you have to, you know, keep up to that level. What is expected out of you, you know…when we were in the army, we used to fall short of saris because we didn't want to repeat and, you know, I'm just talking on the lighter part, now…." (Echo)

While narrated humorously, this statement reveals the performative dimension of social belonging. “Keeping up to that level” suggests an awareness of implicit standards governing appearance, etiquette, and comportment. The reference to not repeating saris, though light-hearted, indicates the pressure to be visible within a close-knit organizational community. Hence, social gatherings function not merely as leisure events but as the space where rank, discipline, and collective identity are subtly reinforced. So, maintaining appearance and decorum becomes part of organizational labour, aligning with accounts that describe such expectations as embedded within military social culture (Mamgain). What appears superficial from the outside carries symbolic weight within. Participant Victor’s narrative further expands this understanding of social and organizational labour:

“A significant aspect was that we regularly also had social responsibilities—welfare meets, parties, helping jawan's wives advising, organizing and attending events, helping new army wives adjust to the lifestyle, and addressing any issues they faced. For instance, if a soldier's wife had financial troubles or problems at home like domestic problems or her husband not giving money, I would understand and step in, offer guidance, and escalate the matter to the appropriate authorities if necessary and reach a resolution and provide support…Apart from home responsibilities, we participated in various social activities, whether it was a ladies' gathering, a welfare meeting, or celebrations. Life was never idle; we were always engaged in something constructive.” (Victor)

Victor’s testimony reveals that the army wife frequently operates as an intermediary between families and the organizational structure. Her responsibilities extend beyond symbolic presence to include welfare coordination, informal counseling, conflict mediation, and administrative liaison. In cases involving financial distress or domestic disputes, she serves as both a listener and a conduit, escalating concerns when required. This positions the army wife

as a critical node within the social governance of the military community. Notably, Victor's remark that "life was never idle" counters popular stereotypes of leisure-driven military social life. The rhythm of welfare meetings, advisory roles, and community engagement suggests sustained organizational participation. Such labour is continuous, relational, and often emotionally demanding.

Yet it remains largely unrecognized as labour in mainstream discourse. This invisibility parallels broader patterns in which gendered social work is naturalized rather than acknowledged. Together, Echo and Victor's narratives complicate reductive assumptions that army wives merely accompany their spouses. Instead, they reveal a layered role shaped by mobility, hierarchy, visibility, and welfare responsibility. The army wife emerges as a socially embedded actor whose labour is adaptive, context-sensitive, and organizationally consequential. These lived accounts align with the broader argument of this study: that military domesticity is not confined to emotional waiting but encompasses structured participation, social governance, and negotiated belonging within the armed forces' organizational framework.

- Between Storytelling and Lived Experience: A Balanced Portrayal in Amaran (2024)

Based on the real-life story of Major Mukund Varadarajan, it adopts a storytelling lens explicitly shaped by his wife, Mrs. Indhu Rebecca Varghese. Rather than positioning the soldier as the narrative center, Amaran foregrounds the military experience through relational memory, emotional proximity, and domestic perspective. Moreover, this narrative choice allows the film to move beyond heroic spectacle into the intimate terrain of military family life. Furthermore, this film is widely understood to have engaged closely with military organizational frameworks and advisory processes, which contributed to its grounded depiction of routines, environments, and operational realities.

Therefore, the degree of organizational engagement enabled the film to portray events with a heightened sense of realism while retaining narrative sensitivity. Significantly, unlike many Indian military films, Amaran opens with the narration and introduction of Major Mukund through his wife. In doing so, it establishes Mrs. Indhu not necessarily as a peripheral figure, but as a narrative anchor whose emotional and experiential lens shapes the viewer's understanding of her spouse and his army life. In this way, the film presents multiple moments that showcase her active support for Major Mukund's professional aspirations, including his decision to join the forces and his continued service despite the risks involved. Nevertheless, Mrs. Indhu's support also reflects an informed understanding of her spouse's profession, its demands, and its uncertainties.

In this way, the portrayal aligns closely with the lived experiences of army wives, who internalize the tempo of military life while maintaining their families' emotional stability (Rodriguez and Margolin). On the other hand, this movie brings out the complex role of technology in contemporary military families. In comparison, advancements in communication have bridged distances that once defined military separation. This film acknowledges how constant connectivity can intensify stress, anxiety, and fear. Within military communities, wives are often formally guided, especially by senior personnel's wives, not to communicate distressing information to serving personnel, as such news may affect operational readiness, induce guilt, or distract soldiers during their duty. In turn, rather than romanticizing silence, the film gestures toward the darker consequences of the sustained, visual, audible awareness of danger within military households, conditions that can manifest as psychological strain or breakdown among some wives.

Scholarly literature further links unresolved family stressors, such as financial strain and marital discord, to extreme psychological outcomes among serving personnel, including

suicide or fratricide, and crucially, turning the lens back toward the army wife, foregrounding the often-unacknowledged psychological and physical toll of sustained fear and uncertainty. Wherein, constant awareness of spouse duty in conditions or locations that can threaten life manifests in stress-induced illnesses and emotional exhaustion. Experiences that often remain invisible and untreated (Col Dixit; Habeshian; B. S. Joshi; Kalia; Srinivas). This reality finds resonance in Papa's narrative:

"Life is a struggle. Everyone's life is a struggle. The more you win, the more you lose. I pray to god that my husband returns home. But I don't have faith in god. I can't sleep at night because of stress. I have developed migraine because of this." (Papa)

Papa's testimony reveals the embodied consequences of sustained fear. Insomnia, migraine, and spiritual ambivalence are not abstract reactions but lived symptoms of chronic uncertainty. Her words capture the paradox of hope and disbelief, resilience and exhaustion, that often coexist within military households. Empirical research similarly documents increased health concerns and hospital visits among military wives during prolonged separations, driven by cumulative stress and emotional strain (Pexton et al.; Rosen et al.). The film's portrayal of Mrs. Indhu reflects this fragile equilibrium and strength that does not negate vulnerability. At the same time, Amaran highlights the paradoxical emotional economy of military life. Even brief returns, sometimes marked by injury or impending redeployment, become intensely cherished. The scarcity of time magnifies its value.

Fleeting moments acquire disproportionate emotional weight precisely because of their fragility. The film captures this ambivalence without romanticizing it, allowing joy and dread to coexist within the same frame. The expectation of composure, particularly in moments of loss, emerges as a disciplining force. The injunction not to cry publicly, to embody strength as an "army wife," transforms resilience into performative duty. Mrs. Indhu's portrayal reflects

how such expectations shape a life sustained through memory, community, and continued relational belonging (Pandey). Strength here is not the absence of grief but its regulation. Oscar's narrative further illustrates how relational continuity persists even after loss:

"Like, I lost my husband…but I'm still in touch with all his seniors, his COs, his COs' wives, and our colleagues, I'm still in touch. Because I want to see him live. I want to see that my husband is one of them. Till today. So, that is one of the reasons, dear. We are very active... so, I am always part of them…" (Oscar)

Oscar's words demonstrate that organizational belonging does not dissolve with demise. Continued engagement with the military community becomes a means of sustaining relational presence. Memory is organized through ongoing participation, allowing the spouse to remain symbolically integrated within the military collective. This continuity reflects how veer naris negotiate grief through community attachment and shared remembrance.

Through Mrs. Indhu's character and the lived accounts of participants, Amaran achieves a rare balance between storytelling and experiential authenticity. It neither romanticizes sacrifice nor reduces it to spectacle. Instead, it acknowledges the psychological cost, emotional labour, technological pressures, and enduring strength that shape contemporary military domesticity. In doing so, the film reflects a representational maturity consistent with the broader argument of this study: army wives are not merely figures of waiting or symbolic sacrifice but adaptive individuals navigating layered emotional, social, and organizational realities.

CONCLUSION

However, before arriving at the central arguments of this paper, it is important to acknowledge that cinematic texts are inherently open to multiple interpretations. Viewers and readers may approach films through their own social locations, experiences, and worldviews,

which inevitably influence how the narratives are understood and evaluated. So, this paper will not claim to offer a singular or definitive reading of the films under discussion. Instead, it brings together widely debated perspectives on these cinematic portrayals, along with the author's, with a specific focus on how the identities and roles of Indian army wives have been constructed, constrained, and, in some instances, reconfigured over time. Hence, this paper traced the gradual but uneven evolution of cinematic representations of army wives in Indian cinema through the comparative exploration of Border (1997), RRR (2022), Sam Bahadur (2023), and Amaran (2024). So, in early portrayals, most notably the Border film, relied heavily on the trope of army wives in waiting and suffering, whose lives appeared suspended in emotional anticipation of their spouse's return.

However, while such depictions may have been emotionally resonant and rooted in a particular historical moment, they offered a narrow and incomplete representation of the lived realities of army wives. Even so, it is important to note that such portrayals must also be read within their temporal context. As in earlier periods, letters served as the primary medium of communication between soldiers and their families, and wives often lived in prolonged uncertainty about their spouse's safety. In this regard, emotional longing and anxiety were extremely pragmatic aspects of military family life, particularly for the wives of personnel serving in combat arms. However, the problem lies not in the expression of these emotions but in their cinematic overrepresentation to the exclusion of everyday agency, labour, and resilience. On the other hand, Indian war and military cinemas have traditionally prioritized narratives of national identity, patriotism, sacrifice, and hypermasculine heroism.

As a result, women, especially army wives, have frequently been relegated to the margins, appearing primarily as emotional anchors or moral backdrops to the male soldier's journey. Ironically, even though films allocate considerable screen time to commercial

elements such as romance, music, and spectacle, they often fail to make use of the narrative space to offer a grounded, realistic portrayal of these women's lives. Instead, cinematic convenience frequently overrides representational responsibility, thereby reinforcing unrealistic, skewed, and often misleading perceptions of army wives among civilian audiences. Furthermore, as demonstrated in Sam Bahadur and Amaran, contemporary Indian cinema has begun to gesture toward more nuanced portrayals. These films move beyond the trope of passive sacrifice towards depicting army wives as emotionally engaged partners, socially embedded actors, and resilient individuals navigating the complexities of military life. This is to say, emotional labour, mobility, social responsibility, and psychological endurance; these narratives resonate more closely with the lived experiences documented in academic literature, as reflected in the qualitative data.

Therefore, this paper argues that army wives cannot be understood through a singular, linear, or static lens by drawing on cinematic analysis and qualitative narratives. In this context, Indian army wives are highly adaptive individuals who respond differently depending on context, environment, branch of service, posting, and life stage. Moreover, during times of war or active operations, expressions of fear, sadness, and anxiety are natural and a profoundly human response. Simultaneously, many army wives present a composed and resilient exterior, suppressing personal distress to provide emotional stability for their families and communities. Nonetheless, these seemingly contradictory responses coexist, reflecting the emotional complexity of military life at home. Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that army wives are not simply "any women" who happen to marry into the military. Instead, through the gradual process of acculturation, they become army wives, learning, adapting, and embodying a distinct set of organizational expectations.

However, this transformation is not imposed through formal training, as in the case of serving personnel, but is acquired through experience. Over time, army wives learn military jargon, internalize codes of etiquette and comportment, navigate hierarchical social structures, and cultivate self-reliance. Additionally, their homes, appearances, interactions, and emotional expressions become subtly regulated by organizational norms, often in ways that remain invisible to outsiders. Also, across these films, literature, and qualitative data, several defining characteristics consistently emerge. In this way, army wives are portrayed to be resilient, adaptable, emotionally restrained, socially responsible, culturally fluid, and deeply supportive. Also, they carry out significant emotional, social, and organizational labour while remaining largely absent from dominant cinematic narratives.

As a consequence, this paper contends that cinematic representations matter not merely as entertainment but as powerful cultural texts that shape civilians' understandings of military life. When these representations remain limited or stereotypical, they risk obscuring the complex realities of those who live alongside those in uniform. In conclusion, this study calls for a more ethically attentive and socially grounded approach to representing army wives in Indian cinema. Hence, by moving beyond simplistic tropes of sacrifice and waiting, filmmakers should portray military domesticity as a shared, dynamic, and deeply human experience. Such representations not only honor the lived realities of the army wives but also contribute to a more informed and empathetic civilian engagement, one that recognizes that the nation is sustained not necessarily at the frontlines but also within homes shaped by resilience, adaptation, and strength.

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