

CONTRIBUTION OF CAPTAIN LAXMI SEHGAL IN INDIAN NATIONAL ARMY

Ms. Apurva Chotelal Sahani

Department of History,
Vivekanand College, Kolhapur (Autonomous)
apurvasahani17@gmail.com

Abstract:

Indian National Army contributed a lot for freedom movement in India. As Subhash Chandra Bose inspired the male and female soldiers. He established Jhansi Rani Regiment in Indian National Army, headed by Captain Lakshmi Sehgal. Each stage of the life of Lakshmi Sehgal was extraordinary. As a young medical student drawn to the freedom struggle; as the leader of the all-woman Rani of Jhansi regiment of the Indian National Army; as a doctor, immediately after Independence, who restarted her medical practice in Kanpur amongst refugees and the most marginalised sections of society; and finally, in post-Independence India, her life as a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), years that saw her in campaigns for political, economic and social justice. After, Indian Independence she struggled a lot. This research paper deals with the life and contribution of Captain Lakshmi Sehgal and their contribution in the freedom movement in India.

Key words: Regiment, AIDWA, Indian National Army, Marxist, Communist

Introduction:

Lakshmi Sehgal was born Lakshmi Swaminadhan on October 24, 1914 in Madras to S. Swaminadhan, a talented lawyer, and A.V. Ammukutty, a social worker and freedom fighter (and who would later be a member of independent India's Constituent Assembly).

Lakshmi would later recall her first rebellion as a child against the demeaning institution of caste in Kerala. From her grandmother's house, she would often hear the calls and hollers from the surrounding jungles and hills, of the people who in her grandmother's words were those "whose very shadows are polluting." The young Lakshmi one day walked up to a young tribal girl, held her hand and led her to play. Lakshmi and her grandmother were furious with each other, but Lakshmi was the one triumphant.

First rebellion:

After high school in Madras, she studied at the Madras Medical College, from where she took her MBBS in 1938. The intervening years saw Lakshmi and her family drawn into the ongoing freedom struggle. She saw the transformation of her mother from a Madras socialite to an ardent Congress supporter, who one day walked into her daughter's room and took away all the child's pretty dresses to burn in a bonfire of foreign goods. Looking back years later, Lakshmi would observe how in the South, the fight for political freedom was fought alongside the struggle for social reform. Campaigns for political independence were waged together with struggles for temple entry for Dalits and against child marriage and dowry.

Her first introduction to communism was through Suhasini Nambiar, Sarojini Naidu's sister, a radical who had spent many years in Germany. Another early influence was the first book on the communist movement she read, Edgar Snow's Red Star over China

Meeting with Netaji:

As a young doctor of 26, Lakshmi left for Singapore in 1940. Three years later she would meet Subhash Chandra Bose, a meeting that would change the course of her life. "In Singapore," Lakshmi remembered, "there were a lot of nationalist Indians like K. P. Kesava Menon, S. C. Guha, N. Raghavan, and others, who formed a Council of Action. The Japanese, however, would not give any firm commitment to the Indian National Army, nor would they say how the movement was to be expanded, how they would go into Burma, or how the fighting would take place. People naturally got fed up." Bose's arrival broke this logjam.

Lakshmi, who had thus far been on the fringes of the INA, had heard that Bose was keen to draft women into the organisation. She requested a meeting with him when he arrived in Singapore, and emerged from a five-hour interview with a mandate to set up a women's regiment, which was to be called the Rani of Jhansi regiment. There was a tremendous response from women to join the all-women brigade. Dr. Lakshmi Swaminadhan became Captain Lakshmi, a name and identity that would stay with her for life.

The march to Burma began in December 1944 and, by March 1945, the decision to retreat was taken by the INA leadership, just before the entry of their armies into Imphal. Captain Lakshmi was arrested by the British army in May 1945. She remained under house arrest in the jungles of Burma until March 1946, when she was sent to India - at a time when the INA trials in Delhi were intensifying the popular hatred of colonial rule.

Captain Lakshmi married Col. Prem Kumar Sehgal, a leading figure of the INA, in March 1947. The couple moved from Lahore to Kanpur, where she plunged

into her medical practice, working among the flood of refugees who had come from Pakistan, and earning the trust and gratitude of both Hindus and Muslims.

CPI (M) activist:

By the early 1970s, Lakshmi's daughter Subhashini had joined the CPI(M). She brought to her mother's attention an appeal from Jyoti Basu for doctors and medical supplies for Bangladeshi refugee camps. Captain Lakshmi left for Calcutta, carrying clothes and medicines, to work for the next five weeks in the border areas. After her return she applied for membership in the CPI(M). For the 57-year old doctor, joining the Communist Party was "like coming home." "My way of thinking was already communist, and I never wanted to earn a lot of money, or acquire a lot of property or wealth," she said.

Captain Lakshmi was one of the founding members of AIDWA, formed in 1981. She subsequently led many of its activities and campaigns. After the Bhopal gas tragedy in December 1984, she led a medical team to the city; years later she wrote a report on the long-term effects of the gas on pregnant women. During the anti-Sikh riots that followed Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, she was out on the streets in Kanpur, confronting anti-Sikh mobs and ensuring that no Sikh or Sikh establishment in the crowded area near her clinic was attacked. She was arrested for her participation in a campaign by AIDWA against the Miss World competition held in Bangalore in 1996.

Presidential candidate:

Captain Lakshmi was the presidential candidate for the Left in 2002, an election that A. P. J. Abdul Kalam would win. She ran a whirlwind campaign across the country, addressing packed public meetings. While frankly admitting that she did not stand a chance of winning, she used her platform to publicly scrutinise a political system that allowed poverty and injustice to grow, and fed new irrational and divisive ideologies.

Captain Lakshmi had the quality of awakening a sense of joy and possibility in all who met her – her co-workers, activists of her organisation, her patients, family and friends. Her life was an inextricable part of 20th and early 21st century India – of the struggle against colonial rule, the attainment of freedom, and nation-building over 65 tumultuous years. In this great historical transition, Captain Lakshmi always positioned herself firmly on the side of the poor and unempowered. Freedom fighter, dedicated medical practitioner, and an outstanding leader of the women's movement in India, Captain Lakshmi leaves the country and its people a fine and enduring legacy.

Taken over by Subhash Chandra Bose along with that of INA, which was formed in February 1942 by Captain Mohan Singh and other Indian prisoners of war. Sahgal was drawn to the freedom movement by Bose and his charismatic leadership. She played an active role in the formation of all-women Infantry Regiment of the INA named after Rani of Jhansi who fought the British Raj in 1857. She was the only woman member of the Cabinet of provisional government of the Azad Hind Fauj led by Bose.

After her arrest in 1945, she was brought back to India. In 1947, she married Colonel Prem Kumar Sahgal, who served along with her in the INA. In the post-independence era, Sahgal resumed her medical practice in Kanpur. She worked with the refugees of post-partition India. She joined CPI/CPM in 1971 and traveled to Kolkata, and worked at the border areas of Bongaon for six weeks providing medical help to the displaced and migrants.

Sahgal was the founding member of All India Democratic Women's Association which was formed in 1981. The organisation became a suitable platform for her to raise women's issues consistently, and embark on several campaigns for the same. In 1984, she also went to Bhopal with a medical team to treat patients of the gas tragedy. She had also confronted frenzied mobs during the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 on the streets of Kanpur ensuring the safety of Sikhs around her clinic. Sahgal dedicated her life to the country and its people for which she looked for opportunities without thinking for consequences.

She continued to look after patients in Kanpur till the age of 92 as she charged a very minimal fee or sometimes nothing at all. She became the joint candidate for the left parties in the Presidential Election of 2002, and ran against APJ Abdul Kalam, but lost the election. She died on July 19, 2012, due to cardiac arrest at the age of 97 in Kanpur. Her body was donated to Kanpur Medical College for medical research.

Lakshmi Shegal was also awarded the Padma Vibhushan, the second highest civilian award by the then Indian President K R Narayanan. Her legacy lives on for generations to get inspired by her.

Concluding Remarks:

"Freedom comes in three forms," the diminutive doctor goes on to say on camera in her unadorned and direct manner. "The first is political emancipation from the conqueror, the second is economic [emancipation] and the third is social... India has only achieved the first.

Lakshmi was a medical practitioner, a commander of Subhas Chandra Bose's Rani of Jhansi Regiment, and also a member of Communist Party of India (CPI). Laxmi was a true revolutionary who broke social conventions since her early childhood and spoke against the caste practices in Kerala.

Lakshmi Sehgal headed the women wing of the Indian National Army.

“Political democracy has given a new meaning to our independence. We have got the resources and the manpower. But, because of widespread greed, we have not been able to make the best use of them, to benefit all of us,” she said.

She is great freedom fighter also social activist.

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