

Captain Lakshmi Sahgal - India's Most Illustrious Women

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Abstract

A well-known and prosperous Indian, Dr. Lakshmi was the first female captain of the Rani Jhansi regiment, which was established before India's independence. She was also a well-known freedom fighter. She never gave up her career and continued providing modest medical services to the nation's citizens, particularly the underprivileged and disenfranchised.

Keywords: *Rani Jhansi Regiment, Indian Independence League, Indian National Army.*

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi said that the sacrifices made by Indian women would be remembered as the most significant part of the country's struggle for freedom. A well-known and prosperous Indian, Dr. Lakshmi was the first female captain of the Rani Jhansi regiment, which was established before India's independence. She was also a well-known freedom fighter. She never gave up her career and continued providing her modest medical services to the nation's citizens, particularly the underprivileged and disenfranchised. At the age of 92, Captain Lakshmi Sahgal was still seeing patients every morning when she said, "The fight will go on," one day in her packed Kanpur clinic in 2006. "Freedom comes in three forms: political emancipation from the conqueror, economic [emancipation], and social.... India has only achieved the first" she said, while speaking on camera to Singeli Agnew, a youngfilm-maker from the Graduate School of Journalism, Berkeley, who was filming a documentary on her life. India has lost an unparalleled warrior who fought for social, economic, and political rights with the demise of Captain Lakshmi.

Scope of the Study

Throughout India's 55 turbulent years of national development, independence from the British Raj, and

fight against it, Captain Lakshmi has played a crucial role in shaping the country's fate. She has played a proactive and motivating role in this significant historical shift. Captain Lakshmi was always sure to stand solidly by the oppressed. Captain Lakshmi is an exceptional leader of the women's movement in India, a doctor, and a liberation fighter who personifies the highest goals of women's leadership.

Objectives

The main objective of this work is to bring out the consolidated efforts of Dr. Lakshmi Sahgal from her young age and all through her life as a doctor, a freedom fighter, and as a social activist who worked hard for the rights of the marginalized sections and women empowerment.

Methodology

The narrative and analytical methods were used in this study. This study critically examines the contributions made by Captain Lakshmi in the freedom movement.

Dr. Lakshmi Sahgal was born in Madras on September 24, 1914, to Subaram Swaminathan, a criminal lawyer who worked at the Madras High Court, and A.V. Ammukutty, a freedom fighter who actively participated in our nation's freedom war. When she was a child, she asked why Dalits were

not permitted to enter temples and about the discrimination against them. She did not say anything or object when her mother took her garments and toys away when she was a little child in order to burn them during the freedom struggle under the "motto" of not using foreign items. Lakshmi actively participated in nationalist initiatives from a young age, which forbade the use of foreign products and forbade picketing establishments that sold foreign alcohol products. When Lakshmi was sixteen years old, her father passed away. Her mother became involved in the Indian National Congress and the liberation fight after her father passed away.

Lakshmi was a member of the Congress Youth Wing when she was in college. When Bhagat Singh was taken into custody and given an order to be hanged, she felt enraged and upset. This incident marked a turning point in her life, and she began to actively raise money for him. She was an enthusiastic participant in the student strike and protests against Bhagat Singh's detention and his hanging; these protests were widespread across South India. Even though she was actively engaged in the Independence movement on her own, she disagreed with some of the things that occurred in the nation, particularly Gandhiji's beliefs that students should abandon their education in order to devote themselves entirely to the nation's cause and fight for its independence. She firmly believed that, to establish and contribute to the growth of the nation after independence, educated and intelligent people would be needed. She also held the view that professionalism would be essential to strengthening the nation and that professionals could guide it toward progress and expansion.

Lakshmi's decision to study medicine was motivated by her strong desire to help the underprivileged, particularly women who are

marginalized in society. Lakshmi wed B. K. N. Rao in 1936; Rao was a pilot for Tata Airlines, but the couple separated after just six months of marriage and divorced ten years later. In 1938, she graduated with her MBBS from Madras Medical College. A year later, she was awarded a Diploma in Obstetrics and Gynaecology. She had the medical qualifications to serve in the Second World War. The majority of her fellow medical students at that time were assigned to the Indian Army's medical unit. She waited patiently and continued with her service, but she noticed that nothing happened in her life until 1939. She was driven to do more for the country, but she felt that something was missing from her and that there was not much fulfilment in her life.

Lakshmi moved to Singapore in early 1940, leaving Madras behind. There, she opened a clinic and treated the lowest of the poor realising, that most of them were migrant labourers from India. She became drawn to the Anti-British movement when it began in Singapore and actively participated in the freedom movement at the same time.

In India, the first decade of the century saw a surge in both terrorist and revolutionary activity. To avoid being put down by the British government and to start the ideal preparations for their country's liberation, a few revolutionaries fled to other nations such as Japan, China, Singapore, and Malaya. Similarly, around the same time period, a civilian movement led by Rash Bihari Bose emerged in 1941 and was named the Indian Independence League (IIL). Indian women in East Asia have contributed since the founding of the Indian Independence League. They have helped prepare and gather bandages, dressed injured soldiers on the battlefield, collected money and supplies needed by the troops, and were a major source of inspiration for young people to stand up for their country at a crucial juncture.

Following the historic British colonial power's loss of Singapore to the Japanese in 1942, Singapore emerged as a key hub for the Indian freedom movement. The first Indian National Army [INA] was established by General Mohan Singh in 1941, and Nethaji Subhash Chandra Bose eventually assumed leadership of the INA. Nethaji led Congress Seva Dal, Indian National Congress's volunteer branch, before joining INA. Many well-known individuals who attended the INC session and the wing expressed doubt that the organisation was attempting to impose violence, which was in direct opposition to Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent programme.

In March 1943, the Indian Independence League [IIL] Singapore officially opened its women's wing. Mrs. M.K. Chidambaram served as the chairman and secretary, while Miss Saraswathi was named as the chairperson/chairman. Upon being named Secretary at Headquarters, Dr. Lakshmi travelled to several regions of Malaya, Thailand, and Burma. Her primary goal was to establish branches throughout South East Asia and to encourage many individuals to become volunteers in the IIL. In the end, women's sections existed in all Indian Independence League branches, and their main responsibilities were money collection and military comforts. A Council of Action was created by numerous nationalist Indians, including K. P. Kesava Menon, S. C. Guha, N. Raghavan, and others. While Dr. Lakshmi enthusiastically volunteered her services to the Indian Independence League, and a revolutionary spirit entered the organisation upon Nethaji Subhash Chandra Bose's appointment to the position.

There were constant rumours when Nethaji Subhash Chandra Bose would visit Singapore. She was a member of the welcoming committee that was supposed to greet Nethaji Subhash Chandra Bose upon his arrival because she was a senior member of

the IIL and one of the committee members from Singapore. Nethaji informed his advisors that he intended to launch a women's movement, and the president of the Singapore IIL was aware that Lakshmi desired to see Nethaji.

Lakshmi started gathering women to establish the regiment; she could assemble about 25–30 women. Since they lacked uniforms, they went in search of white saris and, with the assistance of some military officials in the INA, began to practice shooting guns in the coming days. When Nethaji Subhash Chandra Bose landed in Singapore on July 12, 1943, the women gave him a guard of respect. Nethaji was overjoyed by Lakshmi's effort. Following this incident, several public gatherings were held, and Nethaji declared his intention to form the Rani of Jhansi regiment, a women's regiment, in support of the Indian Independence movement. When Nethaji began asking on July 5, 1943, about whether Indian women lived in Singapore and whether any of them would be qualified to command a regiment, Mr. K. P. Kesava Menon immediately proposed Lakshmi. Even though it was late at night, Lakshmi was urged to meet Nethaji immediately because he insisted on seeing her right away. A meeting was set up immediately. She accepted his idea without hesitation the minute he made it, and the next day, she began the process of organising the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the INA. The reaction from women to join the all-women brigade was overwhelming, and in a short amount of time, these preparations turned into a well-trained fighting force of female recruits.

The first women's camp was established in Singapore on October 23, 1943, and numerous more camps in Malaya and Burma followed. The purpose of recruiting more women was to increase the regiment's level of activity. All of these new hires had received training in social work, nursing, and general

welfare. The military portion of the instruction included general studies, map reading, weapon training, tactics, and drills. In addition, they received training in the use of revolvers, grenades, swords, daggers, bayonets, submachine guns, and rifles. Even yet, their training was gradually given to them, and it wasn't like the poor new police recruits had to spend six hours running in the intense sun. Their training was rapid, even if it happened gradually. Their strength and vigour were so greatly enhanced by their regular hours, exercise, and food that they did not have to prepare themselves, so there was no possibility of physical strain. In addition, they underwent a rigorous physical examination before being hired. With the assistance of a few army doctors, Captain Lakshmi performed this test on her own because the army did not want people joining the INA, getting sick, and causing issues.

Rani of Jhansi Regiment participated actively in the frontal assault. After receiving the rank of colonel, Lakshmi became well-known and went by the name of Captain Lakshmi. She was involved in both the military and the medical fields. She bravely fought and saved many lives on the battlefield thanks to her genuine efforts, commitment, and dedication. On March 4, 1946, she was ultimately apprehended and sent to India, where she was greeted with love and revered as a national hero. However, as soon as the British authorities realised that holding her as a prisoner would be ineffective, she was released.

Following her release from jail, Captain Lakshmi began an assiduous mission to free and rehabilitate INA personnel who were incarcerated. She committed herself fully to the Indian liberation movements. Even though she failed to raise significant amounts of money for the INA soldiers, she visited every region of the nation and, in the process, was able to inspire people to rebel against the colonial power.

The fight for liberating the Red Fort proceeded after the prisoners, including Col. Prem Kumar Sehgal, whom she subsequently married, was released. Nethaji was joined by men who were already serving in the INA. The women members were civilians who had given up fighting for their motherland's liberation; the majority were second or third generation Indians who had grown up in South East Asia and had returned to India to continue the fight for freedom. In addition to leading a sizable contingent of individuals at the front, Captain Lakshmi provided support to the soldiers engaged in combat with the British. She gained popularity as a result of everyone praising her characteristics in great detail.

Although some of them thought of the Rani of Jhansi regiment as only a spectacle, the reality was that they had little military experience but were extremely driven and dedicated to fighting for India's freedom. When the INA was forced to retire, the Rani of Jhansi regiment was also engaged as a legitimate fighting force, and their presence in Burma was unavoidable. While British planes bombarded every road, these battalion of female soldiers traversed the forests. They were attacked by guerrilla forces more than twice while they were retreating.

The regiment lost roughly three girls in an attack once during the night, but they did not give up and kept fighting.

When Azad Hind's provisional administration was announced on October 21, 1943, Captain Lakshmi Sahgal was the only female member of the cabinet. She was commended for her bravery and loyalty and played a heroic role. In addition to participating in combat, she helped many others escape certain death during those dreadful days when INA soldiers were being pursued by the triumphant British forces.

Nethaji believed it was his moral duty to ensure that every man in the Rani of Jhansi regiment returned home safely in April 1945, as the British were preparing to invade Burma through Rangoon. For the members who were brought in from Burma, this method of operation worked well, but it proved to be quite challenging for the rest. On April 24, the main regiment departed for Rangoon. Nethaji worked on the process day and night, but he could not handle the transportation arrangements. As a result, Nethaji accompanied them through the woods, protecting them until they arrived at their destination.

Given that Captain Lakshmi was born and raised in India, she could not see why she should return to Singapore. Therefore, she left the Rani of Jhansi regiment and enrolled in a forward hospital, where the patients could not be transferred to other locations because of a variety of conditions, including severe wounds, amputations, acute malnourishment, and anaemia. The hospital was located in the middle of a jungle, and the hospital blankets were red. Despite taking all these safety measures, including chopping up their priceless blankets and painting massive red crosses over the area, they were bombed, and the hospital was destroyed.

Using bullock carts, they attempted to transport as many patients as possible. They eventually came to a position where they were positioned between the British, who were moving forward, and the Japanese who were retreating. They dispatched their patients who might be able to accompany the Japanese as they withdrew to Thailand. However, they had an older citizen who was immobile because of severe injuries. Three orderlies and his personal assistant were among the six that ventured further into the jungle. They were eventually apprehended. However, the poor man passed away; thus, their efforts were in vain.

Captured in May 1945, Dr. Lakshmi was brought to Rangoon. She was instructed to routinely report to the military authorities but was not placed under custody. She resumed her medical practice there, which allowed her to maintain contact with some civilian INA recruits who had fled into hiding. On October 21, they arranged a fantastic meeting and alerted a few Indian war correspondents who worked for different newspapers. The army then arrived and saved the correspondents. This meeting received extensive media coverage in India. However, Dr. Lakshmi was taken into custody once more and placed under house arrest at a British station. When Captain Lakshmi arrived in India on March 4, 1946, the populace joyfully welcomed her and acknowledged her valour. After realising that holding her in custody would incite public outrage, the British government decided to free her. She travelled the entire nation, raising money for INA members and organising people against colonial authority. She relentlessly fought for the release and rehabilitation of INA personnel who had been imprisoned and demobilized.

In March 1947, Captain Lakshmi tied the knot with INA leader Col. Prem Kumar Sahgal. Following their marriage, the pair relocated to Kanpur from Lahore, where she resumed her medical practice and began helping Pakistani flood survivors. Over the years, she has won the respect and admiration of Kanpur's Muslims and Hindus alike because of her honest and hardworking efforts. At that time, she was Kanpur's only medical professional treating Muslims. Later, she opened a tiny maternity hospital in rented space, this facility is still in operation today. Her genuine and committed work for the underprivileged made her a legend in Kanpur, where people celebrated her campaign for president with enthusiasm.

Subhashini, Lakshmi's daughter, became a member of the CPI(M) in the 1970s. She informed her mother about a request for physicians and medical supplies for Bangladeshi refugee camps made by Mr. Jyoti Basu, the chief minister of West Bengal at the time. After leaving for Calcutta with clothing and medication, Captain Lakshmi laboured in the border regions for five weeks. She applied for CPI (M) membership after her return.

Following the war in 1971, Dr. Lakshmi became involved in left-wing politics, initially joining the women's movement and then the trade union movement. She was elected vice-president of the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) upon its founding in 1981. She has since become deeply involved in the projects, initiatives, and battles of the largest women's group in the nation.

Despite her numerous obligations, she continued practicing medicine from her clinic in the centre of Kanpur. Her life served as a constant source of motivation and safety for the underprivileged and victims. Her clinic was located in a popular and congested neighbourhood, and she bravely stood in front of the ransacking mobs during the anti-Sikh riots in October 1984, which followed the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In the street where her clinic was located, not a single Sikh was attacked. She attempted to bring calm back to Kanpur during the anti-Sikh riots.

She commanded a medical team that responded to the December 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy and provided care for the victims. She lost her spouse, Prem Sahgal, in 1992. Her involvement in a campaign against the 1996 Miss World pageant in Bangalore led to her incarceration. At the age of 92, she continued her medical practice and saw patients on a daily basis in her Kanpur clinic until 2006. She became a living legend in Kanpur thanks to her

kindness and assistance to the underprivileged. In 1998, Dr. Lakshmi Sahgal received the Padma Vibhushan.

In 2002, she was put forward by the Left Wing as their candidate for the presidency of India. Her opponent, Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, was supported by the National Democratic Alliance. She conducted a nationwide campaign during the competition, speaking at packed public gatherings. She openly acknowledged that she would not even have a chance to win, but she took this as an opportunity to publicly criticise the political system for allowing injustice and poverty to worsen, which in turn opened the door for illogical and divisive ideologies. Dr. Lakshmi Sahgal passed away in Kanpur on July 23, 2012, at the age of 97, following a cardiac arrest on July 19, 2012. For medical study, Kanpur Medical College received a donation of her body.

Conclusion

The most remarkable woman, Dr. Lakshmi Sahgal, faced challenges at every turn of her life. She opposed utilising foreign products as a young child, spoke out against child marriage and dowries as a teenager and became involved in the Indian freedom movement while still a medical student. She assisted the underprivileged while practicing in Singapore. She also led the Indian National Army's Rani of Jhansi regiment, which fought the British with ferocity and escorted a women's battalion from Southeast Asia through the jungles. She began her medical career in Kanpur as soon as the country gained its independence, treating refugees and other people in need.

Her life developed after independence as a member of the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). She tirelessly advocated for political

independence and the interests and rights of society's marginalized groups throughout her life.

Captain Lakshmi could awaken society and make individuals conscious of the stigma that society holds against them. As an individual, she raised awareness and consistently experienced delight, whether it was with her patients, coworkers, organisation activists, family, or friends. As a courageous freedom warrior, devoted medical professional, and exceptional leader of the women's movement in India, Captain Lakshmi leaves the nation and its people with a magnificent and lasting legacy. She consistently stood up for the weak and impoverished.

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