

LAKSHMI SEHGAL (1914 - 2012) - CAPTAIN OF THE WORLD'S FIRST WOMEN'S MODERN MILITARY REGIMENT

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ABSTRACT

We could not fix the date and time of the origin of struggle for India's independence. From the beginning of the political domination of the British, many uprisings and uproars had happened against the British in various parts of India and at various timings. There were many reasons for their uprisings. Mainly the policy of the British was responsible. Women played a mighty role against the British rule in India. They showed their valour on streets, inside jail and in legislature. Captain Lakshmi was one among them, she worked along with Subhash Chandra Bose in Indian National Army in Singapore. In this research paper, an attempt has been made to highlight the services rendered by her for the mother country in pre and post-independence period.

Key Words: *Revolutionary, Azad Hind, Activist, Delhi Chalo, Authoritarian.*

Introduction

Lakshmi Sehgal was a revolutionary of the Indian independence movement, an officer of the Indian National Army, and the Minister of Women's Affairs in the Azad Hind Government. Each stage of her life represented a new stage of her political evolution. She was emerged as a young medical student, later drawn into the Indian freedom struggle. Till her life time she worked for the cause of political, economic and social justice. Lakshmi Sehgal is commonly referred to in India as Captain Lakshmi, a reference to her rank when taken as prisoner in Burma during the Second World War. She possessed unique positions in Indian history. It is unforgettable. In this research paper, her birth, parents, her early life, her role as captain of the women regiment in Indian National Army, her services with Subash Chandra Bose, her married life and children, her services

in independent India and her last days are dealt with. From this research paper one could understand the tireless services of her.

Early Life of Captain Lakshmi

Lakshmi Swaminathan was born on 24th October, 1914 in Chennai. Her parents were S.Swaminathan and A.V. Ammukutty. Her parents were born in Kerala. Their marriage was an inter-caste marriage. Her father was a Brahmin and mother belonged to Nair Community. It was unthinkable at that time. Even though there were oppositions for their marriage, boldly they got married. Her father was an eminent lawyer in Chennai, Who practised criminal law at Madras High Court and her mother, better known as Ammu Swaminathan, was a social worker and independence activist. She had two brothers Govind Swaminathan, who was an eminent lawyer, and one of the leading members of the Chennai Bar, Subram, her younger brother and a sister Mrinalini Sarabhai, wife of nuclear scientist Vikram Sarabhai, was a famous dancer. Four of them were brought up equally without any gender disparity. Lakshmi studied in Queen Mary's College. Then she studied medicine and got her MBBS degree from Madras Medical College in 1938. Next year, she received her diploma in gynaecology and obstetrics. She worked as a doctor in the Government Kasturba Gandhi Hospital located at Triplicane, Chennai. They were brought up in an Anglophile family. But sudden turning point occurred in their life style. When her father Swaminathan defended a young man Kadambur, accused of murdering a British officer De la Haye. It created a storm in Chennai for being the daughter of an advocate who saved a native who murdered an honourable English officer. This, she has mentioned in her auto biography. Further, she has written that after this incident, she and her siblings were pulled out of the English school and admitted to a government school. They started conversing in Tamil and Malayalam instead of English and wore Indian costumes. Most of the servants, in their house, were Dalits and they shared food with them much to the surprise of others. Interestingly, the principal of Queen Mary's College was the sister of the murdered British Officer De la Haye. "But she never exhibited any hatred towards her," Automatically, this incident led her family against the colonial rule. 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 foreign

dresses to burn in a bonfire of foreign goods in support of the Swadeshi movement. In the South, the fight for political freedom was fought simultaneously with 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. In course of time, her interest in politics was kindled by Subashini, the younger sister of Sarojini Naidu, and one of the accused in the Meerut conspiracy case. She was a radical who had spent many years in Germany. She was hiding in Lakshmi's house at that time and they spent many nights discussing communism. By this way she was introduced to communism. Another early influence was the first book on the communist movement she read, Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China*. Later, this influenced her to join the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Her marriage was fixed with pilot P.K.N. Rao. Due to some reasons her marriage was cancelled. It became a turning point in the life of Lakshmi.

Entry into the Freedom Struggle

In 1940, she left for Singapore after the failure of her marriage. When she was in Singapore, she met some members of Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army. In Singapore, she established a clinic for the poor, most of whom were migrant labourers from India. It was at this time that she began to play an active role in the India Independence League. During the Second World War, Britain surrendered Singapore to the Japanese in 1942. At that time the young and dynamic Lakshmi, as a doctor aided the wounded prisoners of war, many of them were interested in forming an Indian liberation army. In Singapore at this time, several nationalist Indians were working there including K. P. Kesava Menon, S. C. Guha and N. Raghavan, who formed a Council of Action. Their Indian National Army, or Azad Hind Fauj, however, received no firm commitments or approval from the occupying Japanese forces regarding their participation in the war. Because many officers, generations together worked under the British, So, due to loyalty, they were not ready to turn against the British immediately after the surrender of British in Singapore during the II World War.

At this juncture, Prem Sehgal was one of the young officers who took the lead in convincing others that they should opt for an army of liberation. In his student days in Lahore, he had been a courier for the young revolutionaries around Bhagat Singh. Later

on, disillusioned by Gandhi's tactics which he considered cowardly, he resumed his studies and then joined the army. He somehow felt that this was the only place where he could conclusively prove that he was as good if not better than his White Masters.

As part of the group of officers who accepted the Japanese offer, Prem Sehgal was granted a certain amount of freedom and could meet other Indians in Singapore. One of these was Lakshmi who immediately became completely involved in all the discussion and debate surrounding the birth of the Indian National Army. She agreed passionately with Prem Sehgal and, along with other members of the India Independence League, assisted him and his colleagues in every way possible. There were several difficulties. Senior most officers had accepted the Japanese offer, General Mohan Singh, had second thoughts and opted out. The Japanese in turn, inducted an old Indian revolutionary, Rash Behari Bose who had escaped capture by the British by going into self-exile in Japan, and brought him to Singapore as head of the INA. But he had been out of touch with India for too long. He realized that he was not acceptable to the officers and men of the INA. To his eternal credit he suggested to the Japanese that they somehow bring Subhash Chandra Bose from Berlin.

While under house arrest, after the call for the Quit India Movement was given in August 1942, Subhash Chandra Bose dramatically escaped to Europe through Afghanistan and Central Asia. On arrival in Berlin he organized the Indian students in Germany to form an Indian National Army. Working on the theory that 'my enemy's enemy is my friend', he attempted to persuade the German government and Hitler to support this army's entry into India. Logistics and the war situation just did not allow this to happen and the German government agreed to the request of the Japanese to send Bose to Singapore. He left by submarine at a time when the II World War at sea was powerful and arrived in Tokyo from where he left for Singapore reaching there on 3rd July 1943. The India Independence League in Singapore organized a huge rally on 6th July, 1943. All the men and officers who had rallied to the Indian National Army were there in their military formations and so was almost every member of the Indian community in the city. Netaji, as Subhash was now known, made an inspiring speech in which he promised them their freedom in exchange for blood. He also appealed to the Indian community to contribute generously so that the INA could truly be Indian and not an army of Japanese stooges.

The same evening, Netaji met with the leaders of the India Independence League and placed his astonishing proposal before them. He was determined to raise and train a regiment of Indian women. The Japanese had laughed him out of court but he remained firm, determined that he would ask his own countrymen to contribute to the cost of this unusual regiment. He asked the League members to suggest the name of a woman who could lead the regiment. For the moment, this was the only problem he could foresee. He was convinced that once a leader was identified, recruitment would not be a problem. Lakshmi's name was suggested. In the next few days, at all his public meetings, Bose spoke of his determination to raise a women's regiment which would "fight for Indian Independence and make it complete". Lakshmi had heard that Bose was keen to draft women into the organisation and requested a meeting with him from which she emerged with a mandate to set up a women's regiment, to be called the Rani of Jhansi regiment (an all-woman unit). Women responded enthusiastically to join the all-women brigade and Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan became Captain Lakshmi, a name and identity that would stay with her for life. Lakshmi was appointed as the commanding officer of what became the Rani of Jhansi Regiment and later joined Netaji's Council of Ministers of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind as its only woman minister. At that time she was just a young doctor, barely out of college, when Subhash Chandra Bose picked her up to lead the Rani Jhansi Regiment. She continued at home for a few months but all her waking hours were spent in the INA office. The recruitment of the 'Ranis' for the women's regiment is an inspiring illustration of what the most ordinary of women can do when given the slightest of opportunities. When news spread in Singapore that such a regiment was to be formed, hundreds of young women from the city-state and from different parts of Malaya offered themselves for training and battle. They belonged to all social classes and communities but were, for the most part, poor or lower middle class South Indian women. The response was so overwhelming that many of them had to be turned away, weeping. Training started with an initial batch of 300 women in Singapore. A few months later, another 100 were recruited in Rangoon, Burma and a training camp was started there. Finally, there were more than 1200 recruits. Of them 200 were trained as nurses though all of them received military training as demanding as that of the male soldiers. The Rani of Jhansi Regiment was not a 'nursing' unit as many people believe. It was trained for combat and sent to fight on the Burma front.

The Indian National Army (INA) marched to Burma with the Japanese army in December, 1944, but by March, 1945, with the tide of war turning against them, the INA leadership decided to beat a retreat before they could enter Imphal. Lakshmi was arrested only in July 1945 and kept under house arrest in the jungles of Burma until March 1946, where she lived with a sympathetic and hospitable Burmese family. Many of the officers of the British Army stationed in Rangoon or passing through were, of course, Indians. Many were either friend of Lakshmi's family or, in any case, extremely sympathetic towards her. One of them was Thimayya, the senior-most Indian Army officer to pass through Rangoon at the time. He later became the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army. An old family friend, he was a constant visitor, much to the consternation of the soldiers who were supposed to be guarding Lakshmi in captivity! Lakshmi was even allowed to practice medicine during this period of very lax captivity. All limits were transgressed, however, when on 21st October she addressed a public meeting commemorating the anniversary of the formation of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind. This event received wide coverage and the British rulers in India were not amused. Orders were issued for Lakshmi to be transferred to Kalaw in the interior. Here too she was given her own house and establishment. Old friends like the Sardar Ishwar Singh family lived nearby, so she was well looked after.

Meanwhile, the Constituent Assembly began its sessions in Delhi. Ammu Swaminathan was an elected member from Dindigul and she, along with many others, pressed for Lakshmi's early release and return to India. Finally, in August 1946 – after the Red Fort trial was over and the three accused, first sentenced to hanging and then to transportation for life, were given royal pardons because of popular pressure. She was sent to India - at a time when the INA trials (In an incredible act of stupidity, the British government decided to hold a public trial of three officers – Prem Sehgal, a Hindu, Shahnawaz, a Muslim and Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon, a Sikh - in the Red Fort so that the whole world could be convinced of their treachery.) in Delhi heightened popular discontent with and hastened the end of colonial rule. Lakshmi was brought to Calcutta from Rangoon by plane and set free at Dum Dum airport. She did not have a penny in her pocket but she did have her younger brother Subram's address in the city. She took a taxi and told the driver that her brother would pay the fare. The driver turned around, took a close look at her and said delightedly, 'I will drive you around anywhere you like for as

long as you like as my guest!’ On reaching Subram’s flat, she found it locked. Her sister-in-law had left for Lahore to have a baby and Subram was on tour. The British officer who had accompanied Lakshmi from Rangoon checked into the Grand Hotel where he met Aurobindo Bose, a relative of Netaji’s who seemed to be anxiously looking for someone. He went up to him and said, ‘I think I know who you are looking for. You will probably find her at her brother’s.’ Aurobindo rushed to Subram’s flat and found Lakshmi sitting on the steps, quite desperate. He took her to the Bose family home and she left for Delhi the next morning. She, later, learned that her mother had been going to the airport everyday for the past ten days with her son, hoping to receive Lakshmi. Finally, she had given up and left for Delhi the previous evening.

Prem Sehgal was also in Delhi and the next few days, weeks and months were hectic and exciting. The INA heroes and heroine were the darlings of the nation who wanted to do nothing else but fete them. They, however, had serious work to do: hundreds of INA personnel and their families were coming to India, sick, wounded and destitute, and the priority was to collect an INA Relief Fund. While Prem stayed on in Delhi (he was Secretary and Jawaharlal Nehru, President of the INA Relief Committee), Lakshmi went to Madras where a huge camp for the INA refugees was set up and then on to Kerala. Her cousin Susheela remembers the day that Lakshmi arrived in Anakara (Lakshmi’s ancestral place). From the local railway station, she had to cross the dry riverbed to the village and soon she was at the head of a huge procession of excited men, women and children. Finally, she reached Vadakath House where her grandmother was waiting for her with tears streaming down her cheeks.

Captain Lakshmi as a Singer



The gramophone record of Captain Lakshmi Sehgal's songs

Captain Lakshmi Sehgal was a good singer also. Two of her songs on a gramophone record make priceless history in Indian independence struggle. Through this Gramophone record, fund was raised for the activities of INA. Immediate to the formation of the INA, two popular marching songs were sung by Lakshmi and her friends. So, these songs would be produced in early 1940s. The Swadeshi Movement had taken wing in the country by then and INA decided to depend on an indigenous company than tag on to a foreign one. Hence, these two songs were recorded by National Gramophone Record Company, Bombay, is an indigenous company under the label Young India. The songs, 'Delhi chalo...' and 'Jaya ho jai...' were sung, the record label states, by Lt. Col. Lakshmi and Party. These songs were very popular in those days. Lakshmi sang these songs especially, the 'Delhi Chalo ...' song in many of her independence struggle meetings. It was so inspiring and of her voice also. This activity of Lakshmi kindled the fire of patriotism among young Indians. Lakshmi is believed to have travelled the length and breadth of the country to collect funds for INA and also to mobilise people against the British. These gramophone records sold well enabling the INA to collect a good sum from the initiative. INA soldiers sang these songs when they trained and even when they

marched out to battle. Noted musicologist and film historians also have this audio cassette of these songs. When Captain Lakshmi was alive, she was thrilled to know that the songs were still available in a meeting. It was invaluable thing in those days. The second song, 'Jaya ho jai...' is actually the National Anthem of the Provisional Government of Free India that begins 'Subhsukh chain...' It is from the complete version of Rabindranath Tagore's 'Jana Gana Mana...' The music was supposed to have been composed by Captain Ram Singh Thakur of the INA, as Qaumi Tarana (National Anthem) in 1943. The original Lakshmi's voice is different from the present anthem, perhaps closer to the original.

Post Independence Era and Captain Lakshmi

After the release of the prisoners, including Colonel Prem Kumar Sehgal, Lakshmi married Colonel Prem Kumar Sehgal in March, 1947, in Lahore. He was the son of Justice Achhru Ram Sehgal, a member of the Punjab High Court Bench who was one of the judges in the Gandhi Murder Case. After their marriage, they settled in Kanpur, where she continued her medical practice and aided the refugees who were arriving in large numbers following the Partition of India. She earned the trust of Hindus and Muslims in her service. She imbibed the idea of service to humanity from Netaji, and as a doctor, she served the disadvantaged sections. They had two daughters: Subhashini Ali and Anisa Puri. In early 1970s, her daughter Subhashini had joined the CPI (M). During the Bangladesh crisis in 1971, she brought to her mother's attention an appeal from Jyoti Basu for doctors and medical supplies immediately Sehgal organized relief camps and medical aid in Calcutta for refugees who streamed into India from Bangladesh. She joined a medical camp at the border run by the People's Relief Committee which had strong affiliations to the CPI (M) in West Bengal. The tireless devotion and commitment of her colleagues made a strong impression on her, and long discussions with them soon erased her anger with the Communists' mistaken understanding of Netaji and his strategies for winning independence. After her return from Bangladesh in 1971, she applied for membership in the CPI (M). For the 57-year old doctor, joining the Communist Party was "like coming home." Her way of thinking was already communist, and she never wanted to earn a lot of money, or acquire a lot of property or wealth. After becoming member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) she represented the party in the Rajya Sabha. She

was active first in the trade unions and then in the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) in which many women party members worked.

She was one of the founding members of All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) in 1981 and led many of its activities and campaigns. She took a medical team to Bhopal after the gas tragedy in December, 1984. She worked towards restoring peace in Kanpur following the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. She was arrested for her participation in a campaign against the Miss World competition in Bangalore, in 1996. She was still seeing patients regularly at her clinic in Kanpur in 2006, at the age of 92. In 2002, four leftist parties – the Communist Party of India, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Revolutionary Socialist Party, and the All India Forward Bloc – nominated Sehgal as a candidate in the presidential elections. She was the sole opponent of A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, who emerged victorious. When Captain Lakshmi was the presidential candidate for the Left in 2002, she spoke in the public meetings across the country. While frankly admitting that she did not stand a chance of winning, she used her platform publicly to scrutinise a political system that allowed poverty and injustice to grow, and fed new irrational and divisive ideologies.

Death of Lakshmi Sehgal

On 19 July, 2012, Sehgal suffered out of a cardiac arrest in a private hospital and died on 23rd July, 2012 at the age of 97 at Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. Her body was donated to Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi Kanpur Medical College for medical research. Her death was considered as a great loss to the women's movement in India. Lakshmi Sehgal was survived by her daughters Subhashini Ali and Anisa Puri, her grandchildren Shaad Ali, Neha and Nishant Puri and by her sister Mrinalini Sarabhai.

Honours and Awards

In 1998, Sehgal was awarded the Padma Vibhushan by Indian President K. R. Narayanan for her selfless services in pre and post independent India. Lakshmi Sehgal wrote her autobiography titled *A Revolutionary Life: Memoirs of a Political Activist*. She has written her life time with Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and other members of the Indian National Army. To honour her services the Government of India has proposed to name Kanpur Airport as Captain Lakshmi Sehgal International Airport in Dehat district.

Conclusion

She was a revolutionary and a singer, but she was not an authoritarian by nature. She was always friendly and affectionate towards all the women soldiers and when they queued up for a meal, plate in hand, Lakshmi also did the same. Her death was a personal loss for Netaji's family. 'Her work during Bangladesh war will remain green forever'. The facts are unknown to millions of people even today about the contributions of such dynamic women for the cause of our country. Their selfless struggle for our freedom is invaluable. Captain Lakshmi had the quality of awakening a sense of joy and possibility in all whom she 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. She considered her association with Nethaji was the most glorious period. According to her "Freedom comes in three forms," "The first is political emancipation from the conqueror, the second is economic [emancipation] and the third is social... India has only achieved the first." In this great historical transition, Captain Lakshmi always positioned herself firmly on the side of the poor and socially-economically backward. Her main vision is society should get rid of all evils like poverty, dowry, gender disparity, and so on. She wished women should get their rightful place in the society. She insisted that youth of the country should be given importance. She was a freedom fighter, dedicated medical practitioner, and an outstanding leader of the women's movement in India. She was not fond of money, wealth or property. Her dedication to the cause of freedom is unparalleled. Captain Lakshmi leaves the country and its people a fine and enduring legacy. Throughout her life, she lived as an Indian. She was considered as an icon of selfless service. Her untiring and undying commitment to humanity and its service are truly unimaginable.

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