



“FROM THE BATTLEFIELD TO SOCIAL REFORMER: CAPTAIN LAKSHMI SAHGAL’S INFLUENCE ON MODERN INDIA”

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Abstract: The research paper examines the lasting impact of Captain Lakshmi Sahgal, an influential figure in India’s struggle for independence. She was a dedicated social reformer in independent India. Her transition from revolutionary leader to social reformer highlights her strong commitment to justice, equality and social progress. The present research paper is an attempt to explore her journey from being a revolutionary freedom leader to playing a key role in shaping India’s social and political landscape. It highlights how her influence continues to inspire future generations to work towards a fair and just society, showing that the struggle for freedom and equality goes beyond independence to the broader fight for social justice.

Keywords: Lakshmi Sahgal, INA, Women, Rani Jhansi Regiment, Social, Political, Rights.

Aim: The aim of this research paper is to explore and analyze the lasting influence of Captain Lakshmi Sahgal on modern India, focusing on her roles in the independent movement, healthcare, women’s rights and social activism.

Capt. Lakshmi Sahgal (1914-2012), is a prominent figure in India’s history. She is well known for her significant contributions during the struggle for India’s independence as well as her involvement in social and political movements in the post-independence era. She was the leader of the Rani Jhansi Regiment in the Indian National Army (INA) under Subhas Chandra Bose. She thus emerged as a symbol of female empowerment and resistance against colonial rule. However, her influence reached far beyond her military exploits. She evolved from a revolutionary leader to a social reformer that profoundly impacted modern India, mainly in the realms of healthcare, women’s rights and political activism.

Dr. Captain Lakshmi (Swaminathan) Sahgal was part of the historical transition that India passed through from colonial subjugation to freedom. India struggled against the colonial rule to attain independence. She was an active participant who always kept herself firmly on the side of the poor and unempowered.

Lakshmi Swaminathan was born on October 24, 1914 in Malabar which was then under Madras Presidency. She was the second of the four children born to a cultured and patriotic couple, Subbarama Swaminathan and A.V. Ammukutty, better known as Ammu Swaminathan. Her mother was a Nair from the Vadakkath family of Anakkara, Palakkad in Kerala. She was born in the year that saw the start of the First World War (1914). In her childhood, she witnessed the most tumultuous of the last century's upheavals, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.ⁱ Her life witnessed incredible transformations- movement for democracy, for national liberation, for social justice, for women's emancipation and for revolutionary change that dominated the years of her childhood and adulthood and the idealism and commitment that fired them entered her spirit and became part of her being.

Lakshmi Sahgal and the Indian National Army: A Symbol of Empowerment

Her revolutionary journey began with her active participation in the Indian National Army, founded by Subhas Chandra Bose during World War II. She commanded the Rani Jhansi Regiment and became one of the few women in history to lead a military unit in the fight for national liberation. She was one of those prominent women who placed before the society the thought of individual freedom and self- development. She laid the foundation of the philosophy of women's liberation through her own actions. She was given full responsibility of the regiment, who gathered women with great presurance and determination and inspired them to devote themselves to the freedom of India, awakened patriotism among them and make them realize that if India's freedom has to be achieved then they also have to enter the military battle field with their brothers. The regiment, composed entirely of women, challenged deeply ingrained societal norms about gender roles and became a symbol of women's capabilities in both military and political spheres.ⁱⁱ She played a crucial role in motivating and organizing women within the regiment, embodying a vision for post-independence India where women could actively engage in public life and governance. The INA's battle cry, "Chalo Delhi", was as much a call for gender equality as it was a rallying cry for independence. Capt. Lakshmi Sahgal appointment as the Minister in charge of the Women's Organisation of the Provincial Government of Azad Hind (Free India) is also significant. She was the sole woman member of its cabinet. The emancipation of Indian womanhood to a status of absolute equality with men, whether in the government, or in the Indian Independence League organization or in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment a unit of Indian National Army was a social revolution of incalculable importance to future India. This early experience laid the foundation for her later work in advocating for women's rights and social justice in independent India.

Transition from Revolutionary leader to Social Reformer

Her role in the INA, was symbolic not only for its military significance but also for its social message about gender equality and women's participation in the nationalist movement.ⁱⁱⁱ After India gained independence in 1947, she viewed that only few people got this freedom while quite a large population of the poor and underprivileged as well as women were deprived of it as they continued to remain oppressed and exploited on the basis of class, caste, religion and gender. She was totally disturbed by the situation as she, wanted an egalitarian society. Throughout her life she made efforts to establish an equal society. She chose to stay away from politics of power but still remained deeply political in a fundamental sense, ever sensitive to the

sufferings of the people. Capt. Lakshmi Sahgal returned to her medical profession practicing as a physician in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. In 1950, Dr. Lakshmi Sahgal did honorary medical work in the villages around Kanpur. For this, she organized Women's District Medical Organisation. She provided medical care to people and also gave them classes in minimum health care and hygiene.^{iv} Her work as a doctor became intertwined with her commitment to social justice, as she focused on providing healthcare to the poor and marginalized, particularly women. This focus on public health as a fundamental human right would later form a key part of her social reform agenda.^v In 1971, during Bangladesh war, Lakshmi Sahgal under People's Relief Committee worked voluntarily organized relief camps and medical aid in Calcutta for refugees coming to India from Bangladesh. She also led a medical team to Bhopal during Bhopal gas tragedy.

Sahgal was not alone in this transition. Many freedom fighters, like Aruna Asaf Ali and Ram Manohar Lohia, who fought for India's liberation, continued their struggle for social justice in independent India. They shared a vision that political freedom was incomplete without social and economic equality. Together they advocated for labor rights, gender equality and access to essential services such as healthcare and education.^{vi}

After independence, Lakshmi Sahgal broadened her activism to focus on labor rights, gender equality and health care. She joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist), seeing its platform as most closely aligned with her vision of an equitable society. She became member of the trade Union and Women's Wing of the CPI (M), that gave her an opportunity to learn about the daily new problems of women and workers' rights. She became the president of the All India Jute Worker's Federation. During her patronage in this federation, she tried to eliminate all kinds of social discrimination between men and women. Her engagement in leftist politics demonstrated her strong dedication to tackle the systematic inequalities that remained in post-independence India, especially those related to class disparities, gender issues and access to essential services.

Advocating for Healthcare and Social Welfare

One of her most significant contributions to modern India was in the field of the health care. Her emphasis on healthcare as a basic human right continues to resonate in modern India, where access to quality healthcare remains uneven, especially in rural areas.^{vii} After independence, she worked tirelessly as a physician, providing medical care to the poor and underprivileged. Her clinic in Kanpur offered free or low-cost treatment to those who could not afford it, and her work as a doctor became a form of social activism in itself. Through her medical practice, Sahgal was able to address some of the deep-seated inequalities in healthcare access that continue to affect marginalized communities in India today.^{viii}

She emphasized on healthcare as a basic human right contributed to ongoing debates about healthcare reform in India. Her work in healthcare paralleled the efforts of her contemporaries, such as social reformer and physician B.C. Roy, who became the second Chief Minister of West Bengal and was instrumental in setting up healthcare infrastructure in the region. These leaders recognized the link between public health and social equality, advocating for more equitable access to medical services across India. The push for universal

healthcare in India today, including initiatives like Ayushman Bharat, can be traced back to the efforts to early reformers like Sahgal, who understood the critical importance of equitable access to medical services.

Championing Women's Rights and Gender Equality

One of Captain Lakshmi Sahgal's most lasting contributions was her advocacy for women's rights, both during her time in the INA and afterward as a social reformer. Her leadership of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment was a radical statement about the role of women in the fight for independence, challenging traditional gender roles and paving the way for greater involvement of women in political and social movements post-independence.

After the end of British rule, She work in healthcare also focused heavily on women, particularly in the areas of maternal health and family planning. She understood that the empowerment of women was key to social progress, and her medical practice provided much needed services to women in marginalized communities.^{ix}

In addition to her medical work, Sahgal participated in various women's rights movements, advocating for gender equality in both the private and public spheres. She remained active in numerous campaigns for women's rights, reservation for women in legislatures and parliament from 1965 onwards. She associated herself actively with the women's jatha for literacy as part of the total literacy mission and emphasized its importance as a tool for emancipation in 1990's. She also participated in a campaign organized by All India Democratic Women Association against the Miss World competition held in Bangalore in 1996. She climbed onto a car as there was no podium or stage available and delivered a blistering speech blasting the way markets were operating to package and sell beauty as a product.^x She was particularly vocal about the need for greater representation of women in politics and governance, arguing that women's voices needed to be heard at all levels of decision-making. Her work in this area contributed to the broader feminist movement in India, which continues to fight for gender equality in political representation, economic opportunities and personal freedoms.

Sahgal's influence can also be seen in contemporary debates around issues such as gender- based violence, reproductive rights and women's political representation. Her efforts, along with those of her contemporaries, helped to lay the foundation for future generations of women to challenge traditional gender roles and demand equality in all aspects of life.

Political Activism: A Voice for the Marginalized

In addition to her work in healthcare and women's rights, Lakshmi Sahgal remained politically active throughout her life, particularly through her association with left-wing movements. She was a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and became a prominent figure in labor rights movements, advocating for the rights of industrial workers and the rural poor. Her activism focused on issues such as worker's wages, land reform, and the rights of marginalized communities.^{xi} The All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), the nationwide women's wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) was formed in 1981. Lakshmi Sahgal was the co-founder and became one of its five vice –presidents of the largest women's organization in the country. This association worked to stop all forms of social, economic and political discrimination of women and to prevent problems of dowry, divorce and sexual exploitation of women. She was President of the Uttar Pradesh state AIDWA and had a difficult task before her as in the

state women the most exploited section of the society. She took up the challenge and moved her way through religious bigotry, caste and economic exploitation and male chauvinism. She was actively involved in AIDWA activities, campaigns and struggles from its foundation till her death.

One of the notable activity in Sahgal's political career came in 2002, when she contest the Indian Presidential election inspite of knowing that she would not win. She was nominated as a presidential candidate by leftist parties. Captain Lakshmi Sahgal, leader of Rani Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army, champion of secularism, campaigner for women. While the presidency in India is largely a ceremonial role, her candidacy was highly symbolic. It represented a critique of the existing political establishment and highlighted key issues such as social inequality, corruption and the need for the policies that prioritized the rights of the poor and marginalized. Although she did not win the election, she continued to render her services to the nation and her candidacy highlighted key issues, including social inequality and the need for policies that addressed the rights of the poor and marginalized.

The Enduring Influence of Captain Lakshmi Sahgal in Modern India

The legacy of Captain Lakshmi Sahgal continues to influence modern India, especially in the field of healthcare, women's rights and political activism. As a physician and social reformer, she played a crucial role in expanding healthcare access and improving public health infrastructure. Additionally, her advocacy for women's rights remains relevant in today's discussion on gender equality and women's participation in public life.

Sahgal's political activism, particularly her commitment to marginalized communities, had a lasting impact on Indian politics. Her efforts to address social and economic inequalities have inspired a new wave of activist and political leaders who continue to champion the rights of the poor, the working class, and other marginalized groups in India. The healthcare initiatives she championed to current efforts toward universal healthcare in India and her advocacy for women's rights continues to resonate in the ongoing fight for gender parity in political representation and employment.^{xiii} Her legacy serves as a reminder that the fight for justice and equality is ongoing and that true social change requires both grassroots activism and political engagement.

Conclusion: She was very dedicated to her work that even in her last days at the ripe old age of ninety seven, she visited her clinic daily. Her journey from the battlefield to social reformer is a powerful testament to the ongoing struggle for a more just and equitable society. Her influence extends far beyond her role in the freedom movement; it serves as an enduring source of inspiration for those who continue to fight for healthcare access, gender equality and the rights of the oppressed. As India faces contemporary challenges related to inequality, healthcare and gender justice, Sahgal's work remind us that the fight for freedom and equality is an ever- evolving process. Her life encourages future generations of activists and reformers to persist in their efforts to build a nation that honors the principles of justice and equality she so passionately upheld.

Ultimately, her legacy serves as a guiding light, demonstrating that true freedom is not just the absence of colonial rule but the presence of justice, equality and dignity for all citizens. Her contributions to modern

India continue to shape the nation's social and political landscape, demonstrating that the struggle for a fairer and more inclusive society is a continuing endeavor.

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