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## **CAPT. LAKSHMI SAHGA AS THE VICE-PRESIDENT OF AIDWA**

Jaspreet Kaur, Ph.D. Research Scholar  
Department of History, Punjabi University, Patiala,  
Email: [Jaspreet.pbi.uni@gmail.com](mailto:Jaspreet.pbi.uni@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

The present research paper is an attempt to analyse the role of Capt. Lakshmi Sahgal in the largest women organization named as All India Democratic Women Association. It is women's wing of the CPI (M) that was formed in 1981. She as the AIDWA Vice President participated in national and state conferences of AIDWA. She also took part in seminar, rallies and other functions organized by the association.

### **Keywords; AIDWA, Women, CPI (M), Capt. Lakshmi Sahgal, Rights**

The present paper is written on the basis of *Subject Files of Lakshmi Sahgal* (Ashoka Archives of Contemporary India, Ashoka University, Sonapat), AIDWA Reports, newspapers such as *Indian Daily Mail* (Singapore), *People's Democracy* (New Delhi), *FMRAI NEWS* (Kolkata), *The Hindu* (Madras), *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), Journals such as, *Economic Political Weekly*, *The Voice of the Working Women*, *The Social Scientist*, *The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* and the autobiography of Lakshmi Sahgal published under the title, *A Revolutionary Life: Memoirs Of A Political Activist*. Capt. Lakshmi Sahgal, after seeing the political condition of India at the time of independence, chose to stay away from the politics of power. As her daughter Subhasini joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and fortunately at that time, Kanpur had a remarkable CPI (M) trade union leader Comrade Ram Asray, with whom she started her work. Subhasini, brought her mother in contact with the communists. Thus Lakshmi Sahgal, joined the Communist Party (Marxist) and in early 1970s, became active in Left politics, first in the trade union movement and then in the women's movement.

Feudalism, exploitation and atrocities on women continued. There was a need of an hour to make change in society so that the equality granted to women in constitution became a fact. For this Lakshmi Sahgal, drew herself into the ongoing discussion amongst left women leaders for a need of a national women organisation.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the All India Democratic Women's Association (henceforth

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<sup>1</sup>Parvathi Menon, *Breaking Barriers-Stories of Twelve Women*, Left Word Books, New Delhi, 2004, p. 52.



AIDWA), the nationwide women's wing of the CPI(M) 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 and was actively involved in its activities, campaigns and struggles from its foundation till her death. The AIDWA waged a common struggle for democratic rights and a social order where there would be no gender discrimination and exploitation of women. "The aims and objectives of AIDWA include:

- To fight for the social, cultural, educational and mental upliftment of women so that they can develop as responsible citizens.
- To struggle for equality in all fields and implementation of all legal and constitutional rights for women.
- To build a strong campaign against women violence. To free them from the evils of casteism, untouchability, religious superstition and obscurantism.
- To fight for security, demands and rights and proper working conditions for women workers in the organized and unorganized sectors.
- To strive against the social evils such as divorce and dowry.
- To unite and fight for the demands and oppression faced by dalit, minority and adivasi women.
- To fight in co-operation with all other women organizations working for social justice, equal rights, economic independence and working conditions of the women.
- To express solidarity with working class, peasants, youth and students struggling for their legitimate rights.
- To co-operate with women struggling all over the world against exploitation, imperialism, neo colonialism and for national liberation.
- To struggle for the preservation and extension of all democratic rights.
- To fight against imperialist exploitation and defend the freedom and sovereignty of the country."<sup>2</sup>

To fulfill its aims and objectives, AIDWA organized different conferences at centre and state level, meetings, hartals, rallies. This organization wanted to uplift the status of women and provide them

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<sup>2</sup>AIDWA *Perspectives, Interventions and Struggles (1998-2001)*, AIDWA, 2002, New Delhi, p.149. Accessed from [www.aidwaonline.org](http://www.aidwaonline.org).



freedom and equality with men. The first All India Conference of the Democratic Women's Association was held from 10- 12 March 1981 in Madras.<sup>3</sup> It heralded the historic role of rallying all sections of women to fight against the increasing brutalities inflicted upon them through slavery, obscurantist traditions, the shackles of poverty and economic exploitation. An important point to be noted was that there was a close co-operation between committees and women organisations in most of the states against sexual harassment, molestation of women, dowry and such other issues.

“The First National Conference of AIDWA was a historic event because three hundred ninety eight delegates and twenty four fraternal delegates from fifteen states represented a broad section of women in India.”<sup>4</sup> Many of them were experienced organizers, militant fighters, who were conscious of their rights and responsibilities to play an active role in the democratic movement. The presidium of the conference included SusheelaGopalan, Kanak Mukherjee, Lakshmi Sahgal, Swarajayam, Shahajadi, Govindan, Mangleshwari. AhilaRangnekar, who wasconvenor of the conference addressed that the organization founded at this conference represented all the oppressed and exploited sections of women in India. Dr. VinaMazumdar, director of Centre of Women Development Studies (CWDS) and a member of the Commission on the status of women delivered the Inaugural Address and pointed out the differences between the women's movement in the second half of nineteenth century and the earlier movements. There was increasing awareness that the roots of women's oppression lay, not only in obscurantist and traditional values, but more in the unequal economic and political relations. “The conference adopted resolutions on rising prices, atrocities on women, for civil liberties and democratic rights, on social injustices and legal inequality of women, on maternity and child welfare, on amenities in villages, on the demands of working women, on casteism and untouchability, greetings to the governments of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura for upholding the interests of the toiling people, on women's employment and education, illegal traffic in women, and expressed solidarity with the women in the socialist countries and to women of the advanced capitalist countries and developing countries who were fighting for their legal, social and economic rights and against social oppression and sex discrimination.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Report on The First National Conference of AIDWA. *Subject File No. 16(1)*, Lakshmi Sahgal Papers, Ashoka Archives of Contemporary India, Ashoka University, Sonapat, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 25.



The national conference of AIDWA was not held yearly so there were executive committees in states. Lakshmi Sahgal inaugurated the first state conference of Delhi attended by SusheelaGopalan (general secretary) and VimalaRanadive (Vice President). The Centre Executive Committee (henceforth as CEC) meeting was held after the national conference in April and September attended by Lakshmi Sahgal and other members from different states that gave working reports from their states. Lakshmi Sahgal shared her views regarding her experience in the Women's Regiment of Indian National Army and wanted that one should not forget the historical fact that women always fought shoulder to shoulder with men, in the struggle for independence and later in the struggle against an unjust and authoritarian government. "She pointed out that after many years of independence the problems have not reduced in fact they became more difficult as now the enemy is not foreigners but Indians themselves. So, she asked women to fight for themselves, their children by joining the democratic movement against landlords and capitalists."<sup>6</sup> The important issues raised were the deteriorating communal situation, severe drought situation in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Gujarat, Maharashtra was a matter of great concern. The campaign against sex-determination tests and dowry was held in Delhi. "Lakshmi Sahgal moved a resolution welcoming the left front government in West Bengal and the Left and Democratic Front in Kerala. Then there was discussion on Marriage Law Amendment Bill 1981. After that it was decided to launch campaign for anti-war, anti-price rise, Bihar Press Bill, adult literacy classes, common civil code and against atrocities on women and child abuse."<sup>7</sup>

The Second National Conference of AIDWA was held in 1986 at Trivandrum, the third in 1990Jadavpur, West Bengal and fifth in 1998 in Bangalore. The social composition of the fifth conference was extremely significant as for the first time there was substantial representation, almost 1/3, from dalit and adivasi women. There were fifty percent delegates from working class or agricultural or peasant families. At the same time there were a large number of graduates and professional women. Lakshmi Sahgal was elected in the presidium of nine members. The various issues related to women were discussed. Certain amendments were made in this conference regarding the character of the organization.<sup>8</sup> It was deemed necessary for all state units to become branches of the AIDWA and be governed by one constitution, with uniform membership fee and affiliation fee. The name of the

<sup>6</sup>VimalRanadive, *The Voice of the Working Women*, Vol. II, No. 4, July – August 1982, p.11.

<sup>7</sup>*Subject File No. 15(I)*, Lakshmi Sahgal Papers, pp.119-120.

<sup>8</sup>*Subject File No. 15 (II)*, p. 218.



organization could be the same with existing state variations like Paschim Bangla GantantricMahilaSamiti for West Bengal if necessary. New CEC members were elected of which Lakshmi Sahgal was nominated member. There after she attended many CEC meetings and subsequently led many of AIDWA activities and campaigns. There were some weaknesses in the organization which included lack of communication between the centre and state units and vice versa. The central office could not guide many of the weaker states either with material or by directly participating in their activities. There were many states which required propaganda materials, educative leaflets or even booklets. However, the main and serious problem that confronted the women in the country was forcing them to come out in and fight for their rights against injustice. Better co-ordination between centre and states was emphasized. She inaugurated the Maharashtra State Conference of AIDWA on 25 April 1998.

The Eighth National Conference of AIDWA, held at Kolkata from 1- 4 November 2007, was inaugurated by Capt. Lakshmi Sahgal, the indomitable leader of the anti-imperialist struggle. The slogan of the conference was “Confronting Globalization; Defending Secularism; Asserting Equality.”<sup>9</sup> The struggle for women’s equality and democratic rights could not be fought from a de-politicized perspective, the women had to be actively engaged in the battle for their own social emancipation. It is pertinent to note that by this time the membership of the AIDWA had crossed one crore.<sup>10</sup>

The next and Ninth National Conference of AIDWA was held in Kanpur from 9 -12 November 2010. It was for the first time that the conference was held in a state of northern India. Capt. Lakshmi Sahgal began the proceedings of the conference in an inspirational way, “Never give up the struggle for equal rights; this is a fight till our last breath.”<sup>11</sup> She hoisted the flag on the towering figures of national liberation, struggle and women’s movement. Her presence energized the hundreds of activists who heard her calling to them in her unforgettable voice, to be fighters till the last breath was left in their body.<sup>12</sup> There were more than sixty delegates from different states. The adverse impact of neo-liberal policies on women was highlighted. Various issues were discussed and it was pointed out that women

<sup>9</sup>Sudha Sundararaman, “Make the 8<sup>th</sup> National Conference of AIDWA a Success”, *People’s Democracy*, Vol. XXXI, No. 42, 21 Oct, 2007, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup>G Mamta, “Call of the Eighth All India Conference of AIDWA”, *People’s Democracy*, Vol. XXXI, No. 46, 18 November, 2007, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup>“Ninth National Conference of AIDWA Begins”, *People’s Democracy*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 46, 14 November, 2010, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Women’s Equality*, Issue No. 3-4, July- December, 2012, p. 48.



from oppressed and marginalized sections were more vulnerable to gender oppression and violence. The women should take advantage of every opportunity to advance their rights and resist all attacks on them either from the obscurantists, the imperialist forces or from other fundamentalists. The discussion on seven commissioned papers including identity politics and the women's movement, Maoist challenge in the context of problems of women and tribals, the girl child, impact of global economic crises on women, media as a political actor, the situation of women in the North-East and laws and the rights of women was held. Capt. Lakshmi Sahgal inaugurated an exhibition of posters depicting the violence inflicted on the people of West Bengal for having displayed commitment to the left parties against the Maoist offensive<sup>13</sup> Her daughter, Subhasini Ali, who still works for this organization, was appreciated for her rich contribution to AIDWA. She made tireless efforts to make the conference a success.

Capt. Lakshmi Sahgal's greatest concern was for social justice. She was of the view that the goal of social justice continued to elude despite of many advances. "AIDWA gave her a fitting platform to take forward her commitment to issues of social change and women's rights. Until she became a patron of the organization with advancing age, she was ever ready, present and available for any campaign or struggle launched. Her humility, willingness to perform any task, including, translating for comrades into different languages at meetings, were all part of her matter of fact approach to tasks at hand."<sup>14</sup>

Lakshmi Sahgal from the foundation of AIDWA in 1981 till her death in 2012 participated in every centre and state conferences and meetings of AIDWA. She also remained active in numerous campaigns for women's rights, reservation for women in legislatures and parliament. 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 was also arrested for her participation in a campaign by AIDWA against the Miss World competition held in Bangalore in 1996. She was mostly present in every struggle and campaign for the rights of women and her presence generated lot of enthusiasm and vigour in other women. She worked relentlessly for the welfare of women.

<sup>13</sup>"Ninth National Conference of AIDWA Begins", *People's Democracy*, Vol.XXXIV, No. 46, 14 Nov, 2010, p.9.

<sup>14</sup>InduAgnihotri, "The Importance of Being Lakshmi Sahgal", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.47, No. 32, 11 August 2012, p.2.