



Neera Nagini: The forgotten heroine of the Indian National Movement

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ABSTRACT

Neera Nagini, aka Neera Arya, is one of the greatest freedom fighters of our country. As we know, our country was under British colonial rule for around 200 years. During this time, many organisations were established by our freedom fighters to achieve Swaraj. Amongst these organizations the INA (Indian National Army) left a great impact on the history of the National Movement. It is known that this organisation was led by the great patriot and the fear of the British empire Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Many Indian people had joined the organisation and took an active role in direct action against the British Government. Not only that, but also many women were encouraged by Netaji and as a result large number of women stepped out from their homes and joined the INA. For women, Netaji announced the formation of the Rani Jhansi Regiment on October 22, 1943. By then, 1000 women had been recruited for this regiment. Some important members of this regiment were the Thiver sisters, Navratnam sisters, Rojamana and Dr Laxmi Swaminathan, who was appointed the first captain of this regiment. During that time, Nerra Arya came from her hometown and joined the INA, and after seeing her capabilities, Netaji appointed Neera as the first lady spy in the intelligence department of the INA. From here, the struggle of Neera Arya for independence as a freedom fighter began, and for the safety of Netaji, she did not even hesitate to kill her husband, Srikant Ranjanjan Das, who was a senior officer in the Intelligence Department under the



British Government. After this incident, Netaji gave her the title 'Nagini'. She continued her job as an intelligence officer, gathering important messages for INA. After the Surrender of INA in August 1945, most of the soldiers were arrested, but suspicious members of this organization especially the most targeted officers, such as Neera Nagini was arrested and sent to Kalapani imprisonment. During the imprisonment of Kalapani, she was brutally tortured, and she was also going through the pain of rape and molestation. But the tortures had never affected her zeal and morality. As a true patriot, she never bowed her head in front of the British Government. Neera Arya was the first woman prisoner who had managed to escape from Kalapani. Then she went to Hyderabad and always worked for the betterment of the country without revealing her actual identity and never requested to Indian Government for any economic assistance from the Indian Government. She was selling flowers to earn her livelihood and died in 1998.

'Imperialism', the term can be described as a mechanism in which a nation, with his arm power and diplomatic policy, extended its territory and occupied another nation under its dominance. The entire world was affected by this ideology and experienced the two destructive world wars. However, our country, India, was also coming under the Imperialistic power of Britain, and they governed India for almost 200 years. During this vast period of time, there were different modes of protest followed by our countrymen. One of the most popular modes of protest introduced in our country was non-violent protest; a good number of common people participated in these movements. Apart from this, the ideology of direct action or spontaneous movements was also popularised during that time, and these movements were termed the Revolutionary movements. All over India, especially during the period of the 19th century, our country has many organizations which were led these revolutionary movements, such as Yugantar, Anushilan Samiti, Hindustan Socialist Republic Association and many more. These organisations fight directly against the colonial government; in fact, they believed in armed revolution. In the soil of India, these organisations left a far-reaching consequence; among these organisations, one of the most popular was the INA, which played a significant role in this field. The mentioned organisation was led by the pride of our country and one of the most striking characters of Indian history, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. However, INA also has a women's regiment named Rani Jhansi Regiment and an Intelligence department (Dhama, 2023). The intelligence department has played an important role for



INA, and it gathered secret information from the British govt and passed it to Netaji. Neera Arya was appointed as the first lady spy in this department. She is known as the first lady spy of India; her story of Struggle not very much popular, and there are very limited sources available to know her history and struggle. With the help of these limited sources, this work aims to reconstruct the history of Neera Arya.

Neera Arya was born on 5th March 1902 in Khekhra town of Meerat district. At that time,

Meerat was part of the United Province, but now it's part of Uttar Pradesh. She belonged to a very rich and aristocratic family; her father's name was Mahavir Singh, and her mother's name was Lakshmi Devi also had a younger brother named Basant Kumar. Her parents died when she was merely eight years old. Her mother and father both belonged to the Arya Samaj, and she was raised with the values and discipline of the Samaj. However, Neera and his brother were adopted by famous and wealthy businessmen named Seth Chaudhury Chhajumal, who belonged to the Jat kshatriya community of Haryana (Arya, 1968). Chhajumal was not only an influential businessman but also a well-known nationalist leader. Many well-known nationalist leaders and freedom fighters often visited the house of Chhajumal, and even the great patriot and revolutionary Bhagat Singh and his companion Durgawati Devi once visited Kolkata and stayed nearly one month in Chhajumal's house. During this time, Neera Aryaa, with her godfather's family member, stayed at the bungalow on Central Avenue in Calcutta. This was the first time she met with a revolutionary freedom fighter and was influenced by the actions of Bhagat Singh (Arya, 1968). Neera had received her education from a famous school in Calcutta, and she knew several languages, such as Hindi, Bengali, English, and other local languages.

However, Neera had met Netaji in Calcutta many years before joining the INA. Actually, Neera came to Kolkata with her father, Mr Chhajumal, and when her father was busy with a business deal, Neera went to Sea shore with her servant. After seeing the sea, a wish arose in the mind of Neera; she wished to swim in seawater. As she wished, she jumped into the seawater but started drowning in the large waves of the sea and screaming for help. After seeing her condition, no one came to help her. At that time, one brave young man jumped into the seawater and saved her life. After this incident, Neera extended her gratitude to the young man who saved her life. Neera then wanted to know the identity of her life saviour, and the brave man addressed that his name was Subhas Chandra Bose. At this time, Netaji advised her not to swim alone and also asked about her father. Then Neera replied that her father was a businessman and came to Kolkata for some business purpose, and for that reason, he did not come with Neera. Neera was impressed by the bravery of Netaji and called her brother, then Netaji reminded her that it was Raksha Bandhan day and said sister tie a Rakhsha Sutra on my hand and accept me as your brother. Neera did not



have any rakhi at that time for Subhas Chandra Bose, so she plucked out a few strands of her hair and tied them on his wrist. From their first meeting, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose accepted Neera Arya as his sister (Arya, 1968).

In the course of time, Neera grew up and her family searching most eligible groom for her. Neither Neera nor her foster father believed in casteism, and her father chose a rich and educated man for her, named Srikant Jairanjan Das. Their marriage took place in Calcutta on 25th December, 1928 (Rohtash, November, 2024). Her father thought that Srikant was a government officer and was totally unaware of his real job. Actually, Srikant was appointed in the British Intelligence Department and always keep eyes on the activity of the most suspicious freedom fighters. After some days of marriage, Neera came to know his actual job. She became shocked that her husband was a traitor and worked for British Government. Earlier, Srikant spied on Maharaja Pratap Singh for the British Government, and now he was appointed as a spy against Subhas Chandra Bose. Neera also got information that her husband, with the help of the British Government, was planning the assassination of Netaji. Then she tried to understand Srikant that he was working against his own country and countrymen. She told her husband that Netaji was her brother and narrated to him the whole story. But he rejected the request and addressed Netaji and other revolutionaries as terrorists. Then Neera gave him the last choice that he should choose any one, either his Job or his wife. As expected, Srikant chose his Job and Neera started packing and came back to her father's home (Dhama, 2023).

In August 1942, Netaji was appointed as the Commander of the Indian National Army (Azad Hind Fauz). Immediately after taking the responsibility as Commander of the Indian National Army, Netaji called upon Indians to enlist for the INA to fight for the liberation of the Country. Thousands of Young men and women went to Singapore for recruitment in the INA. During this period, Neera Arya stayed in Shahdara Village and gave Sanskrit tuition to children (Rohtash, November, 2024). In the same parallel period, Neera went to Sankrod village to see the Teej fair. In this fair, she came to know from her friend and sworn sister-in-law, Phullo Devi, that Phullo's husband and her brother, Ram Singh, was influenced by Netaji's appeal to join the freedom struggle and very soon Ram Singh with other fellows such as, Sardar Singh Toofan, Ratan Singh, Ram Lal, Umrao Singh, and Murari Arya and many Jat boys went to Singapore to join INA (Singh, 2018). After hearing this, Neera expressed her wish that she also wanted to join them and went to Singapore to serve as a soldier in the INA. To fulfil her wish, Neera went to Ram Singh, and after listening to her wish, Ram said, "You are the daughter of a bania, how could you fire a gun? Instead of a gun, taraju adorns your hands." (Dhama, 2023, p. 42). Then Neera replied that she was raised with patriotic thoughts and she wanted to dedicate her life for nation. Finally, Ram Singh and his



companion agreed to include Neera in their team. They were leaving for Singapore to join the INA, and with them, Neera reached Singapore.

Meanwhile, Netaji established a separate department for women on 22nd October 1943, called the Rani Jhansi Regiment. Dr Lakshmi was appointed as the Captain of the Regiment, and Manvati Arya as the Secretary. Neera enlisted herself in the Rani Jhansi Regiment, and soon, Netaji was impressed by her abilities. An Intelligence Department was also set up by Netaji under the INA, and Pavitra Mohan Roy was appointed as the head. Neera, along with Durga Malla Gorkha, Daniel Cowley, and Saraswati Rajmani, worked as spies for the INA, bringing secret information to Netaji. Although many girls worked in the intelligence department, Neera was personally appointed as a spy by Netaji, earning her the title of the First Lady Spy of the Indian National Army (Dhama, 2023, p. 48). Neera and Saraswati Rajmani dressed as boys and began working at British officers' houses and military camps. They kept watch on the activities of these officers and sent important messages to Netaji. They were instructed that in case they were caught by the enemy should shoot themselves. During this time, one of Neera Arya's companions, Durga, failed to follow these instructions and was captured alive. This was a very difficult period for Neera's team because it endangered the INA. So, Neera and Saraswati Rajmani decided to rescue Durga from the enemy. Both of them, disguised as eunuchs, reached the place where Durga was kept as a prisoner. They almost managed to escape with Durga, but at the last moment, one British guard fired his rifle, which hit Saraswati's right leg. Despite the injury, Neera, Durga, and the limping Rajmani managed to climb a large tree. They had to hide themselves in the tree for three days without food and water, but after that, they safely returned to the INA base camp. Netaji appreciated the courage and bravery of these three fighters. At this time, due to her bravery, Rajmani was promoted to the rank of lieutenant in the INA. Both Rajmani and Neera were appointed as Netaji's bodyguards (Dhama, 2023, pp. 49-50).

One night when Netaji was sleeping in this camp, as usual, Neera, with her companions, was discharging her duty. They were continuously patrolling the back side of the camp of the INA. Suddenly she felt that there was someone was lying in ambush near her. At the same time, Neera heard a sound near her. On looking carefully towards the sound, she saw a shadow, the shadow was of her loyal and intelligent officer husband, Srikant Jayarajan Das, standing in front of her with the gun. After seeing him, Neera easily understood that he had come here to kill Netaji and get the reward of two lakh rupees, as declared by the British on Netaji. Neera warned her husband that he must go back; otherwise, she was compelled to do her duty and protect Netaji from this danger. But Srikant did not take her warning seriously and started mocking her, and said that if he did not kill Netaji, then he would not only lose his job but also be



put behind bars. After hearing his argument, Neera offered that he would join the INA and serve his country. Srikant replied that he did not want to go to Kalapani, but Neera said that for the freedom fighters, Kalapani is no less than a pilgrimage. However, Srikant declined all her requests and moved towards Netaji's camp. Srikant then fired the bullets at the sleeping Netaji, which hit his driver, Col. Nizamuddin (Arya, 1968; Gupta, 1966). After this incident, Neera did not control herself, and she then held her rifle tightly and stabbed the traitor Srikant in the stomach with the bayonet of her rifle to save the life of our great national hero, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. At this time, Srikant fired bullets towards Neera; one of these bullets pierced her ear, and the other just touched her neck, and she fell unconscious. After seeing her bravery and sacrifice as a wife, Netaji expressed his gratitude for the great patriot Neera Arya and said that today Neera took her husband's life by becoming a snake. Thereafter, Netaji rewarded her with the title of '**Nagini**' and also stated that when INA reached Delhi, they would inscribe her name and the name of her Khekda Village at the top of the martyr's memorial at the Red Fort. From this Time Neera Arya popularly known as Neera Nagini, and she continued her work of spying for Azad Hind Fauz and showed her bravery many times (Dhama, 2023; Rohtash, November, 2024).

On 29th December 1943, with the help of Japan Andaman and Nicobar Islands came under the INA, and Netaji hoisted tricolour flags on these islands on 30th December 1943, also renaming the islands as Shahid and Swaraj deep respectively. Indian National Army again attacked the British on February 4, 1944, and it was a terrible attack; the army succeeded in capturing the Indian Plains of Kohima and Imphal on March 18, 1944 (Arya, 1968; Dhama, 2023). The victory of the INA did not continue so long as America attacked Japan, and the country was compelled to surrender, and the INA lost the support of Japan. At the same time, the brave soldiers of Azad Hind Fauz were arrested by the British in 1945. Neera Arya was arrested by the British on 3rd May 1945 and imprisoned in Calcutta jail, and in the jail, she went through cruel torture. She was compelled to lie down on the naked floor, her legs tied with fetters, and continuously interrogated by the British officers. They always asked about Netaji from Neera, and every time she gave the same answer that Netaji had died in an air crash. As they were not satisfied with Neera's answer, they showed their extreme brutality to her. One day, the Jailor of Calcutta jail, with an ironsmith, went to the cell of Neera and ordered the ironsmith to cut the right breast of Neera Arya with his breast ripper but since it was not sharp enough and was blunt, it gave her unbearable pain, then the cruel Jailor instructed her if she did not tell truth about the Netaji, next time they cut off Neera's breasts. (Dhama, 2023; Sharma, 1972). After some days of this incident, she was sent to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a punishment for the murder of a British intelligence officer and her husband, Srikant. Neera, along with other prisoners, travelled to the islands, all of them were captivated and tied



with fetters. The women prisoners had become the means of entertainment, and the British officials always tried to molest them and brutally torture them. Even after such atrocities and insults, Neera often sang this Patriotic song- **“Sarfarooshi ki tamanna ab hamare dil mein hain/ Dekhna hai Zor kitna bazue- qatil mein hai”** (as cited in Dhama, 2023).

During her imprisonment in Kalapani, Nerra was brutally tortured by the jailor and his subordinate staff. Even for a small mistake, her body was hanging with the rope in a triangular shape, and at that time, they were continuously asked about Netaji and tortured her until she became unconscious. After some days of this incident British officers took her to a torture room and tied her to a big hand-operated fodder-shredder-like wooden equipment which had a large wheel and a wider rim, then rotated it violently. After 2 or 3 rotation Neera became unconscious, and when she regained her consciousness, found herself naked and raped (Sharma R. , 1989; Gupta, 1966). One day, all limits were crossed when they took Neera to the seaside and multiple times drowned her with the help of a water lifting appliance, which had a chair at the end. With every dip, they asked about Netaji, and every time she refused to tell anything. Having extreme anger toward Neera, the British Officers physically assaulted her and, at last, threw her into the seawater (Dhama, 2023).

After regaining consciousness, she found herself in a isolated Island which was situated in the midst of the sea, and it was surrounded by a dense forest. Then, many naked tribal people surrounded Neera, who was looking at her strangely and appeared dangerous. She was also unable to understand their language, but she had a strong feeling that these naked people were man-eaters. Then she tried to surrender and started chanting Om. After hearing the word Om, the tribal people started to worship her and assumed her as goddess. Neera stayed with them for a long period, and slowly she was also able to understand their language. After spending a long period with them, Neera decided to go back to main land of India. The kind hearted people made a boat for her departure and filled the boat with several food items, such as fruits, eggs of sea creatures, worms, and oysters. After a voyage of several days, her small boat landed on shore, and she landed in Indonesia. After some time, she went to Hyderabad, where she came to know that India had become free from British rule. (Dhama M. , 2023; Rohtash, November, 2024).

In Hyderabad she also took part in Hyderabad liberation war and helped Arya Samajists against the despotic Nizam. Nizam forcibly converted the Hindu people and tortured the Hindu women severely. Neera used to put a tilak on her forehead when one of the officials of Nizam observed it, brutally beat her and broke her flower basket, as in Hyderabad, Neera was selling flowers to earn her livelihood. Due to



her strong and benevolent character, local people called her Peddamma (Dhama, 2023; Rohtash, November, 2024). During this time she also visited her native land, Khekra, but unfortunately, the people of her village refused to recognise her. At the same time, she also met her former colleague karan Singh Tomar, who requested Neera to stay at his home forever. As we know, the ironic character of Neera denied the offer and came back to Hyderabad (Dhamma, 2001, p. 204). At last day of her life, she was selling flowers to earn her livelihood, but never took any help from the government, her friends or relatives. The brave lady took her last breath at the government hospital of Hyderabad on 26th July, 1998, and her last rites and mukhagni were performed by Tejpal Singh Dhama and his wife Madhu Dhamma. The day of her death is described painfully by Madhu Dhamma as she wrote that, ‘ Amma (Neera Arya) was moving away from me to a distant, a far distant place, probably for a new spy mission or for lighting a torch of liberation for some other nation, for which she had been offering herself to the flames! Suddenly, the sky became clouded and the day had turned dark, and then it started raining, followed by thunder. Raindrops fell on the ground, as if God was also giving Amma a tearful farewell! (Dhama M. , 2023).

Neera Arya, the Iron Lady of our country always remembered in the history of India. The entire life of Neera Arya was filled with struggle and sacrifice. Struggle for the country and sacrifice for Independence. As a true patriot she did not hesitate to kill her husband when he tried to murder Netaji. She tolerated the inhuman tortures in Kalpani's imprisonment but never revealed any secrets of the INA. At the same time, she has motherly qualities, and for this quality, she won the heart of the tribal people. She was considered the first lady spy of India, and she tried to keep her responsibility as a woman spy in every step. Neera could easily have received Government aid and lived happily, but instead of this, she was selling flower at the last day of her life to show her dignity; she always said she fought for the country, not for Government aid. The Name of Neera Arya is written in golden words in the history of India. We should learn bravery, dignity and affection for the country from Neera Arya, the forgotten freedom fighter of our country.

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