

Neera Arya: A Forgotten Revolutionary of The Indian Freedom Struggle

Dr. Rohtash

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Multinimal Modi College, Modinagar, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, INDIA.

Corresponding Author: rohtashtheone@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

The glorious story of India's independence is filled with many forgotten heroes and heroines who sacrificed everything in the Indian freedom struggle, but after independence they had to live a life of anonymity in the country. Captain Neera Arya of the Rani Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army (Azad Hind Fauj) was one such great patriot, courageous, freedom fighter and heroine. To save the life of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, she killed her husband who had shot at him. In view of her unimaginable and unique courage, Subhash Chandra Bose addressed Neera Arya as 'Neera-Nagini'. Hence, she is also known as Neera Nagini. After the surrender of the Indian National Army, when the trial was held in Red Fort of Delhi, all the prisoners were freed. But she was punished for the murder of her British-loyal police officer husband and was sentenced to Kala Pani imprisonment, where she had to endure severe torture. She is considered the country's first female spy. After the country gained independence, Neera Arya lived an anonymous, miserable and helpless life by selling flowers on the roadside in Hyderabad, but did not accept any kind of government assistance or pension. Women of Hyderabad used to call her 'Pedamma'. There is also an epic on her life named 'Neera Nagini'. His younger brother Basant Kumar was also a freedom fighter of the Indian National Army, who lived the life of an ascetic after independence. Many folk singers have written poetry collections and hymns on the life of Neera Arya and her brother Basant Kumar. She has also written about her role in the Indian freedom struggle in the form of her autobiography. Her autobiography also mentions incidents of inhuman treatment meted out to her by the Britishers during her imprisonment in Kala Pani. He shared many incidents of his life and freedom struggle with Hindi-Urdu writer Madhu Dhama. She has also written a novel based on the personal experience narrated by Neera Arya, in which her contribution to the Indian freedom struggle has been highlighted.

Objective of The Study- The objective of this research paper is to study the role and contribution of Neera Arya in the Indian freedom struggle.

Keywords- Neera-Nagini, Azad Hind Fauj, First Lady Spy, Aazad Hind Fauj, Subhash Chandra Bose, Indian Freedom Struggle, Pedamma.

I. INTRODUCTION

Neera Arya was a great patriot, revolutionary, freedom fighter, brave, courageous and self-respecting woman, whom Indians today feel proud remembering with pride. She was born on **5 March 1902** in a wealthy and elite Jat family in **Khekra** town of Meerut district of the then United Province. At present Khekra is a town in Baghat district of Uttar Pradesh state of India. Her

mother's name was **Lakshmi Devi** and father's name was **Mahavir Singh**. She also had a younger brother named **Basant Kumar**. When Neera Arya was only eight years old, her parents died. During this time, **Seth Chaudhary Chhajuram Lamba** of Haryana, who had come to attend the Arya Samaj conference organized in Khekra, adopted Neera Arya and her brother Basant Kumar for upbringing and education. Chaudhary Chhajuram belonged to the Jat Kshatriya community of Haryana.

Influenced by their foster father, these two siblings also became Arya Samajis. Chhajuram ji was a very kind, charitable and patriotic person. Once **Shaheed-e-Azam Bhagat Singh** and his revolutionary companion **Sushila Bhabhi** also stayed with Seth Chaudhary Chhajuram for a month to escape from the British police. Revolutionaries and patriotic leaders used to visit Seth Chhajuram's house, which had a deep impact on Neera. Seth Chaudhary Chhajuram was a very big and famous businessman. His business was mainly spread in Kolkata and various parts of the country. Neera Arya was educated in a famous school in Kolkata. She knew many languages. She was proficient in Hindi, English, Bengali as well as many other languages.

II. FIRST MEETING OF NEERA ARYA AND NETAJI SUBHASH CHANDRA BOSE

This incident happened when Neera Arya was in her teen age. She had gone to the seashore for a picnic with her friends. Although Neera knew how to swim, but she had never swum in a big river, pond or sea before. That day a desire to swim in the sea arose in Neera's mind. She went to swim in the sea water, but started drowning in the waves of the sea. Seeing this scene, the other children with her got scared of some misfortune and started screaming for help. Suddenly, a brave young man jumped into the sea and saved Neera's life. Neera Arya expressed her gratitude to the young man who saved her life and asked him to introduce himself. On this, **Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose** told Neera Arya his name and advised her not to swim alone and asked about her father. Neera Arya replied that her father is a very big businessman who has gone to negotiate a deal with some business party regarding business. That is why her father could not accompany her today. When Neera Arya addressed Subhash Chandra Bose as Brother and thanked him for saving her life, Netaji reminded Neera that it was Raksha Bandhan day and said, sister, tie a Raksha Sutra on my hand and accept me as your brother. Thus, at the time of their first meeting itself, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose accepted Neera Arya as his sister.

III. MARRIED LIFE OF NEERA ARYA

Seth Chaudhary Chhajuram and Neera both were the followers of Arya Samaj. Hence both of them did not believe much in casteism. Chaudhary Chhajuram had chosen a rich and educated groom for the marriage of his daughter Neera Arya. He married Neera with great pomp and show to Shrikant Jagranjan Das. On 25 December 1928, her marriage took place in Calcutta with **Shrikant Jairanjan Das**. Shrikant Jairanjan Das was an officer in the British Police Intelligence Department. Seth Chaudhary Chhajuram was aware of

his being an officer, but was unaware of his working in the Intelligence Department. After marriage, Neera Arya came to know that Shrikant Jayaranjan Das was a traitor and British-backed intelligence officer who had got many freedom fighters arrested. He had earlier spied on **Raja Mahendra Pratap Singh** for the British government and was then engaged in spying on Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. During this time, Neera Arya also came to know that Shrikant Jayaranjan Das and the British officers were planning to assassinate Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. On this Neera opposed her husband and urged him to stop supporting the Britishers against the revolutionaries struggling to achieve independence of the country. No one, nothing is greater than one's country, but Shrikant Jayaranjan Das rejected this request of his wife Neera Arya very ruthlessly and with sarcasm. Neera Arya became very angry with this conduct and behaviour of her husband. She made it clear to her husband that he will have to choose between an English job and his wife. Ignoring his wife, Srikant Jai Ranjan Das chose a government job over and against Neera. Immediately Neera Arya left her husband and in-laws house and came to her father Seth Chaudhary Chhajuram's house. After that Neera Arya left Calcutta and came to her father-like **Acharya Chatursen** in Shahdara, Delhi.

IV. NEERA ARYA AND INDIAN NATIONAL ARMY

During her stay in Shahdara, Neera Arya worked to teach Sanskrit tuition to children. In the same parallel period, Neera Arya came to the 'Teej Fair' organized in **Sankraud**, a village bordering her native town and birth place Khekra. In this Teej Fair, Neera Arya came to know that one of her acquaintances, regarded as brother **Ram Singh**, was leaving for Singapore to join the Azad Hind Fauj. On learning this, Neera met Ram Singh and expressed her desire to go to Singapore to join the Azad Hind Fauj. After Ram Singh's acceptance, Neera Arya reached Singapore along with her younger brother **Basant Kumar, Sardar Singh Toofan of Baghat, Ratan Singh, Ramlal, Umrao Singh Murari Arya, Karn Singh Tomar, Lahri Singh, Sirdare Singh and Girwar Singh**, and joined the Rani Jhansi Regiment of the Azad Hind Fauj. On 22 October 1943, the Rani Jhansi Regiment was formally announced by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. Neera Arya received military training under the supervision and leadership of **Dr. Lakshmi Sahgal**, the first commander of Rani Jhansi Regiment and Secretary **Manvati Arya**. Both male and female cells were formed under the Intelligence Department of Azad Hind Fauj. Under the supervision of **Pavitra Mohan Rai**, the head of the Intelligence Department, Neera Arya did espionage along with her colleagues like **Saraswati Rajamani, Janaki, Bela, Durgamall Gorkha and Daniel Kale**. In view of Neera Arya's ability, she got the privilege of

spying on the Britishers for the first time in the Intelligence Department. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose himself gave the responsibility of this work to Neera Arya. For this reason, she is called the '**First Female Spy Of The Country**'. She, along with her colleagues, dressed in male attire, did espionage on British officers and military camps. During this work, one day, one of her friends, Durgamall Gorkha, was caught by the British while spying. On this Neera Arya and Saraswati Rajamani wore the attire of eunuchs and made the British officers and soldiers in the prison unconscious by feeding them intoxicants. In this way they freed their friend Durgamall Gorkha from the prison. During this time, when Neera Arya was going towards the forest with her friends, suddenly a soldier regained consciousness and shot at them. The bullet fired by him hit Saraswati Rajamani's leg, but even in this situation, they showed great courage and saved their life by hiding on a tree in the forest for three days. After this incident, when Neera Arya, Saraswati Rajamani and Durgamall Gorkha returned to the base camp of Azad Hind Fauj, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose praised and appreciated the bravery and courage of these three freedom fighters wholeheartedly. Thereafter, Saraswati Rajamani was appointed lieutenant and Neera Arya was appointed captain in the Rani Jhansi Regiment of Azad Hind Fauj. Along with this, the responsibility of Netaji's security was also given to Neera Arya.

V. CONTRIBUTION IN INDIAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

Neera Arya has also written her own autobiography titled '**Mera Jeevan Mera Sangharsh**', which was first published by Dinanath Malhotra in 1966 from Saraswati Vihar Prakashan and her autobiography was also serially published in a newspaper in Hyderabad. According to the details mentioned in her autobiography, one night Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose was resting in his sleeping camp. Neera Arya was performing her duty with a gun on the night watch at the back of the camp for the security of Netaji along with her companions. Suddenly she felt that there was someone around. At the same time, Neera Arya heard some noise near her. On looking carefully towards that sound, she saw a shadow. That shadow was of her British loyalist, intelligence officer, husband Shrikant Jayaranjan Das, holding a revolver in his hand, who wanted to kill Subhash Chandra Bose and get the reward of two lakh rupees declared on Netaji by the Britishers. Seeing this Neera Arya warned him to go back from there, but he ignored her warning and moved towards Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose's camp. Shrikant Jayaranjan Das fired the bullets at the sleeping Netaji, which hit his driver **Nizamuddin**. On this without worrying about the stigma of being a husband-killer, Neera Arya stabbed the traitor Shrikant Jayaranjan Das in the stomach with the bayonet of her rifle to save the life of the National Hero of the country,

Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. Suffering from this blow of Neera, Shrikant Jayaranjan Das fired bullets at her. One of these bullets passed near Neera Arya's ear and the other bullet touched her neck and she fell unconscious. Thereafter, when Neera came back to her consciousness, Netaji bowed before her patriotic devotion and said with self-esteem that today you took the life of your husband by becoming a snake to save my life. Thereafter Neera Arya also came to be known as '**Naura Nagini**'. Even after this Neera Arya did great work of spying for Azad Hind Fauj and showed her bravery many times. In the same sequence Azad Hind Fauj overthrew the British government in Andaman Nicobar Islands, Assam etc., but after America's attack on Japan, the Japanese soldiers surrendered. As a result of this Azad Hind Fauj was also forced to surrender. The freedom fighters of Azad Hind Fauj were imprisoned and impaled by the Britishers in prisons like Red Fort of Delhi etc. Neera Arya was also captured by the British on 03 May, 1945 and imprisoned in Calcutta Jail and many atrocities were committed on her. Although due to the rebellion spreading in the whole country, the charges against almost all the freedom fighters of Azad Hind Fauj were dropped, but Neera Arya was not released by the British. She was transferred from Calcutta Central Jail in Bengal to Cellular Jail in Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a punishment for the murder of a British intelligence officer and her husband Shrikant Jayaranjan Das. During her imprisonment in Kala Pani, Neera Arya was tortured numerous times by the Britishers. She was treated in a harsh manner. She was locked in a dark and narrow cell. Neera Arya had to excrete and urinate in the same small space, due to which the cell started rotting cause of foul smell. One of her hands was tied at a height and hung until she became unconscious. She were also given less and contaminated water to drink. Neera Arya was a vegetarian and an Arya Samaji, therefore, to corrupt her religion, the Britishers forcefully fed her cooked rotten meat. She was repeatedly drowned in water by the Britishers and her naked bodies were flogged. The evil and vile Britishers were also forcefully played with her body. Once during the harsh torture being given to Neera Arya in the Cellular Jail of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, she spit on the face of the jailor when he asked for information about Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Due to which the infuriated jailer got her breasts pulled with an iron instrument and made them bleed. But even after being given thousands of such tortures, Neera Arya did not reveal any confidential information related to Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and the Azad Hind Fauj to the Britishers. Finally, in anger, the Britishers made her sit on a circular pulley and rotate it until her whole body broke down and she fell unconscious. The Britishers took Neera Arya in an unconscious state and threw her on a dangerous island. When she regained consciousness, she found herself in the midst of tribals, who were looking at her strangely and appeared dangerous. She was also unable

to understand their language. When Neera Arya remembered God by chanting Om, the tribals mistook her for a goddess. After spending a few days with the tribals, Neera Arya began to understand their language. Thereafter, she told the tribals about her struggle. The tribals also hated the Britishers. They greeted Neera Arya and built a well-made boat for her departure from that island and made all the arrangements like food etc. in the boat for the journey. Ultimately, after travelling in this manner, Neera Arya reached Hyderabad, where she came to know that India had attained independence.

VI. LAST DAYS OF LIFE

Regarding Neera Arya's stay in Hyderabad, it is known from the book titled '**Neera Arya: Azad Hind Fauj ki Pehli Mahila Jasoos**' written by Hindi-Urdu writer **Madhu Dhama**, (wife of litterateur, writer and former reporter Tejpal Singh Dhama, resident of Khekra, Baghpat, U.P.) that after the independence of the country, Neera Arya also participated in the Hyderabad Liberation War. Due to the Nizam's rule in Hyderabad, Islamic fundamentalism had reached its peak. Neera Arya used to apply a Tilak on her forehead. Seeing the Tilak on her forehead, the Jihadis beat her up due to religious animosity and broke her flower basket, but she did not remove the Tilak from her forehead. Neera Arya played a special role in the Satyagraha movement of Arya Samaj for the liberation of Hyderabad from the rule of Nizam. The women of Hyderabad used to address Neera Arya as '**Pedamma**'. During this time, she had once visited her native village and birth place Khekra, but no one recognized her except Chaudhary Karan Singh Tomar, a revolutionary from her neighboring village. Although Chaudhary Karan Singh Tomar, along with helping her, expressed his desire to struggle and cooperate for government aid, but Neera Arya refused Karan Singh Tomar's request saying that she did not fight the Indian freedom struggle to get any kind of government aid. On this, Karan Singh Tomar requested Neera Arya to stay at his house, but she turned down their request saying that she would not become a burden on him and came back to Hyderabad. According to the account written by writer **Tejpal Singh Dhama**, Neera Aayi lived in a wooden hut in Hyderabad in the last days of her life and spent her life selling flowers on the roadside. In the last days, the local administration also demolished her hut built on government land. One day she had a high fever and fell unconscious. At that time, Tejpal Singh Dhama, a journalist of Hindi Dainik Varta and presently a writer, along with his wife Madhu Dhama, admitted Neera Arya to the hospital. Seeing Neera Arya's papers and autobiography, they realized that she was no ordinary woman. When Neera Arya regained consciousness, on the request of Tejpal Singh Dhama, she narrated to him the incomplete story of his struggle. A few days after this, Neera Arya left her body at the age of ninety six years in Usmania Hospital near

Charminar on **Sunday, July 26, 1998**, as a poor, helpless, destitute, sick woman. As soon as Tejpal Singh Dhama went to bring a vehicle to take her body for the last rites, Neera Arya's dead body was taken out of the hospital due to the excessive crowd of patients in the hospital. Tejpal Singh Dhama along with his colleagues performed her last rites with full respect. Thus, the struggle-filled life of the great revolutionary of Azad Hind Fauj, the first female spy of India, the anonymous Captain Noora Arya, who suffered severe inhuman torture in Andaman Nicobar prison, came to an end.

VII. CONCLUSION

Neera Arya is such a great personality of the Indian freedom struggle who strengthened and empowered the freedom struggle of the revolutionaries with her amazing personality and work. There are many such characteristics in her personality which the present young generation can adopt and lead themselves towards nation building. Neera Arya is that great Indian woman who, along with giving the message of '**Country First**' through her work, has also made this ideal a reality. She proved through her personality that family love etc. are meaningless and unimportant in front of patriotism. Through her sacrifice and self-denial for attaining Indian independence, she has proved that if ever in life such a situation arises in front of us that we have to choose between country and family, then a person should give priority to the country by sacrificing the family. Thus, from the above study, it is proved that the role and contribution of Neera Arya in the Indian freedom struggle is incomparable and unforgettable.

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