

## THE REBEL QUEEN OF HILLS: RANI GAIDINLIU'S FIGHT AGAINST COLONIAL AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

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### ABSTRACT

*Until very late, in mainstream historiography, women had been 'hidden from history.' While exploring Rani Gaidinliu's (1915-1993) remarkable journey, this paper aims to revive and honor India's rich history of women. She played a significant role in protecting and revitalizing the cultural heritage of the Naga people. Her multifaceted approach to knowledge preservation, spiritual leadership, and cultural resilience is a testament to making women in history more visible, especially in India's Northeast region. From 1915 to the mid-1940s, Manipur witnessed unprecedented challenges to traditional social structures, with Rani Gaidinliu emerging as a pivotal figure in the region's complex social dynamics. The early 20th century in Manipur marked a profound social transformation, characterized by intricate interactions among the colonial administration, indigenous communities, and the emerging nationalist consciousness. In the tumultuous landscape of early 20th-century colonial India, Rani Gaidinliu proved herself as a genuine guardian of indigenous knowledge, cultural preservation, and spiritual resistance.*

**KEYWORDS:** North-East India, cultural heritage, Heraka, Animism, Zeliangrong.

### INTRODUCTION

Rani's life and legacy as a freedom fighter assert that history is no longer just a chronicle of kings and statesmen, of people who wielded power, but of ordinary women and men engaged in manifold tasks. Women's history is an assertion that women have a history. This article examines her journey as a courageous freedom fighter who fearlessly challenged British colonial rule, risking her life and youth in the process. Despite spending several years in jail, her determination remained unwavering. Upon her release at the dawn of India's independence, she continued to work tirelessly towards cultural revivalism, engaging with prominent political leaders to protect the identity and cultural heritage. Notably, she was the only woman leader from her community to take on the mantle of leadership after Jadonang's execution, spearheading the Heraka movement and forging a new path.

Until very late, in mainstream historiography, women had been 'hidden from history.' While exploring Rani Gaidinliu's (1915-1993) remarkable journey, this paper aims to revive and honor India's rich history of women. She played a significant role in protecting and revitalizing the cultural heritage of the Naga people. Her multifaceted approach to knowledge preservation, spiritual leadership, and cultural resilience is a testament to making women in history more visible, especially in India's Northeast region. From 1915 to the mid-1940s, Manipur

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This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, the life and legacy of Rani Gaidinliu, as well as her pivotal role in the history of the freedom struggle movement in Northeast India, will be explored. The Heraka movement, which initially began as a socio-religious movement, eventually evolved into a political movement. In the second part, this paper will shed light on Rani Gaidinliu's endeavors to protect the distinctiveness and cultural heritage of her people, specifically the "Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmai, and Inpui Naga tribes", spanning across "Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland". Furthermore, this study examines Rani Gaidinliu's pivotal role in preserving the Heraka religion and animist traditions through the Zeliangrong movement, and how her post-incarceration reforms, which aligned with the Hindu religion, contributed to its further development.

**PART:I**

Rani Gaidinliu, a legendary figure, was born on January 26, 1915, in Nungkao village, Tamenglong district, Manipur, to Lothomong and Kalotlenliu, parents from the Rongmei/Kabui tribe." (Anjailiu Niumai: 2018) She was the third of eight children, and her remarkable life story has become a legend. Rani Gaidinliu's leadership and activism played a crucial role in India's freedom struggle, particularly in the Northeast region. However, despite her significant impact, her contributions remain largely unacknowledged in historical accounts. She showed remarkable courage in leading the fight against British oppression, simultaneously safeguarding the traditional Naga way of life and religious practices against forced Christianization. To provide context for the Heraka movement, let's briefly explore the pre-Heraka movement era, particularly the Nupi Lan (also known as Nupi Huhum or Women's War) and perspectives on millenarian movements.

***Historical Background: Pre-Heraka Movement***

The Nupi-Lan movements indeed showcase the region's distinct tradition of women's participation in politics, particularly in Manipur, India. These movements were pivotal moments in Manipuri history where women came together to challenge the Britishers and their revenue policies that adversely affected their lives. The first agitation occurred in 1904, and the second in 1939; both were led by brave Manipuri women who defied British colonial rule and its collaborators. These remarkable women, who stepped out of their homes to face bullets, shaped the course of Manipur's history, earning recognition even from colonial observers. T.C. Hodson's observations underscore the significant contribution of women to Manipur's economy, particularly in trade and commerce. (Hodson, T.C., 1908) Notably, large-scale uprisings, often sparked by colonial exploitation, deprivation, and oppression, have garnered significant attention.

In his latest book, "The Gaidinliu Uprising in British India: Encountering the Millenarian," Sajal Nag explores the intriguing concept of millenarian movements. Historians and anthropologists have categorized these tribal responses as restorative, revitalization, or millenarian movements, highlighting their complex dynamics. "Millenarianism refers to a type of social movement characterized by a belief in a transformative event or era that brings about significant change".(Nag: 2024).These movements often emerged among the tribes during the colonial period, driven by a desire for social, economic, or political change.

Furthermore, "These movements often took the garb of religious movement but were essentially political uprisings." (Nag: 2024, pp.2-3). He further argued, "Communities under

severe stress of existence wish for liberation from oppression and alienation, which, according to their belief, could be provided only by divine intervention. Divine intervention comes in the form of a human leader who proclaims that he is the incarnation of that Divinity and has come to rescue them from their misery. Since such a prophecy is inherent in their religion, people easily accept the proclamation of their leader and follow him in the hope of redemption". (Nag: 2024, pp.2-3).

Against this Backdrop, in the early 20th century, the Heraka movement rose to prominence as a significant millenarian uprising in Northeast India, spearheaded by Jadonang and later on, led by Rani Gaidinliu. Jadonang, a charismatic young Kabui Naga man, proclaimed himself a prophet with supernatural powers, earning reverence as a messiah and titles such as 'King' or 'Spirit King'. He introduced the Heraka faith, a syncretic movement that blended traditional practices with modern elements, aiming to revitalize indigenous Naga culture and counter the spread of Christianity.

***The Heraka Movement: Exploring its Religious and Political Dimensions***

This socio-religious movement, known as Heraka (meaning "pure"), aimed to revamp the indigenous Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak religion, resist British colonial policies, and counter the influence of Christian missionaries. Jadonang's vision of a Naga Raj (independent Naga kingdom) galvanized the Zeliangrong tribes. Haipou Jadonang revitalized the Heraka movement. "he rediscovered the sacred cave of Lord Bishnu in the Bhubon hills and worshipped Tingwang (or Ragwang), the supreme deity." (Kamei: 2004). "Heraka, a reformed native faith, emphasizes devotion to Tingwang through prayer, hymns, and songs. The Heraka movement aimed to transcend evil spirits and eradicate sacrificial practices. Jadonang's reforms included abolishing taboos and constructing temples (Kalumki or Kahumki) with distinct architectural features." (Longkumer: 2011).

Jadonang was born in 1905 in Kambiron, Manipur, and raised by his widowed mother. With a strong spiritual bent of mind, he sought to protect and reform his people's traditional faith, which he believed was under threat. The Zeliangrong community saw him as a messianic figure and thought he would bring freedom from foreign domination." (B. Ursula Graham:1950). Haipou Jadonang's movement began as a socio-religious reform initiative, but it soon evolved into a powerful challenge against the oppressive British regime, with a focus on liberating his people. (Yonuo, 1982). "In 1926, Jadonang's refusal to salute S.C. Booth, the Sub-Divisional Officer, led to a week-long imprisonment in Tamenglong jail, showcasing his defiance against colonial rule. Undeterred, he organized and trained a 500-strong youth armed force called Riphen to resist British dominance". (Kamei, 1997) His followers demonstrated

their allegiance by contributing livestock and cash to the cause. From 1926 to the early 1930s, Jadonang worked tirelessly to sustain the indigenous culture of the Zeliangrong community, envisioning a unified geographical state for his people. The British were extremely leery of the movement and its leader, as it had reformist theological aspirations and political undertones that were critical of British power. The British, alerted by their intelligence network, sought to suppress this movement.

According to Gangumei Kabui, "Jadonang raised his voice against the oppressive law enforced by the British in the hills of Manipur and stirred the masses to resist the policies of the government. Inspired by the Civil Disobedience movement, he urged the people of Zeliangrong not to pay taxes to the government and to disobey the oppressive law that demanded compulsory labor and workforce for the troops. He collected arms for the struggle against the British. He also proclaimed the formation of the Naga Raj and asked the people to pay him tribute for this cause. The Zeliangrong responded spontaneously to his call." (Kabui, Gangumei:1973, p. 223) The British, alarmed by Jadonang's growing influence in the Naga hills, saw the possibility of crushing his movement after the Meitei murders. J.C. Higgins, the Political Agent of Manipur, launched a crackdown by burning villages, destroying temples constructed by Jadonang, and imposing collective fines. This marked a brutal attempt to suppress the nascent nationalist sentiment in the region. "Jadonang was located by the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar in the Bhuban hills, where he was said to have gone on pilgrimage. He allowed himself to be arrested without any resistance. He was charged with the murder of four Meitei traders in the north Cachar hills and sentenced to death without being permitted a defence counsel. Jadonang was executed in Imphal on August 29, 1931, at the age of 26, leaving the burden of leading the movement to Rani Gaidinliu. This time the leadership was taken over by his chief disciple Gaidileu, a Kabui girl." (Roy, J: 1958)

Rani Gaidinliu's connection to Jadonang began with a series of prophetic dreams that guided her to seek him out in Kambiron, Assam. Sharing a familial bond through the Pamei exogamous clan, their relationship blossomed into a mentorship between 1926 and 1927, with Rani Gaidinliu emerging as Jadonang's trusted disciple and lieutenant. According to Asoso Yonuo (1982), "She emerged as a prominent spiritual and political leader following Jadonang's execution by the British on August 29, 1931, in Imphal, Manipur. Jadonang was falsely accused of treason and murder in connection with the deaths of four Meitei traders who had violated a significant social taboo in the village of Longkao (Nungkao)." Despite Jadonang's likely innocence, he was framed, tried, and hanged in a politically motivated trial. This unjust execution propelled Rani Gaidinliu's leadership, a symbol of resistance against British colonial rule."

(Kemei, Ibid). She assumed control of the movement when Jadonang was put to death, as it eventually transitioned from a religious to a political one.

The British, fearing another uprising, attempted to capture Gaidinliu; however, they failed initially. At just 16 years old, she commanded the movement's overall direction. At just 17, Gaidinliu fearlessly led guerrilla troops to oppose British rule, becoming a prime target for British forces. She rallied the Zeliangrong people to resist British authority by refusing to pay taxes and collaborate with the authorities. Forced into hiding, Gaidinliu traversed Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur, evading capture. The British government, desperate to apprehend her, offered substantial monetary rewards and even promised a 10-year tax exemption to anyone who could give information about her whereabouts. The Assam Governor-in-Council centralized operations against Gaidinliu under J.P. Mills, Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills. Her photographs were widely circulated in Manipur, Naga Hills, and North Cachar to aid identification. An award was declared for her capture, and a promise of a 10-year tax remission was made to anyone who provided information. However, this incentive proved ineffective, prompting the British to increase the reward to Rs. 500, yet still, no one cooperated with them.

As Rani fought for the cause, hundreds of young men and women rallied behind her. Her women warriors endured the same hardships as the men, including hunger, thirst, and harsh weather, and learned to wield traditional arms such as the dao and spears. By arming women with these symbols of strength, she drew upon the cultural heritage of the Naga tribes, challenging traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. By engaging in warfare, typically seen as a masculine domain, these women contested patriarchal norms, even if they didn't occupy any leadership positions. The ensuing sporadic battles continued until they finally managed to arrest Gaidinliu, effectively suppressing the potential rebellion between 1931 to 1934. However, the movement's legacy persisted, with intermittent rebellions erupting until the onset of World War II. The Heraka movement, despite being short-lived due to the British Empire's overwhelming power and resources, managed to shake the very foundations of colonial rule, demonstrating the resilience and determination of its leaders and followers.

Lal Dena, in his book "History of Modern Manipur (1762-1949)," mentioned that "In October 1932, Gaidinliu relocated to Polomi village in the Naga Hills, where she initiated the construction of a substantial wooden fortress designed to accommodate 4,000 warriors." Convinced that the next two months would be decisive, she rallied her followers, predicting a victory for either her forces or the British. Meanwhile, British intelligence gathered momentum, and J.P. Mills dispatched a

formidable force of Assam Rifles, led by Captain Macdonald and accompanied by Hari Blah, to Polomi. On October 17, 1932, at dawn, Captain Macdonald's troops launched a surprise attack on the village, catching the rebels. The rebels were unprepared, and Gaidinliu was arrested in a village house. She was subsequently taken to Kohima in chains and later to Imphal for trial." After about ten months in Manipur, she was sentenced to spend her life in jail. She spent almost 15 years in prison, facing brutal treatment and persecution by the British. Freedom came only with India's independence in 1947, when she was released from Tura jail. During her incarceration, Jawaharlal Nehru visited her in Shillong Jail in 1937, bestowing the title "Rani" (Queen) for her courage, a moniker that cemented her legacy as the "Daughter of the Hills." An appeal for her release was made to the British government through Lady Nancy Astor, but the Secretary of State refused, fearing her influence would undermine British authority. She was finally released after India gained independence in 1947." (Niumai, 2018)

She saw the Naga people's fight for freedom as part of India's larger struggle for independence. She spread Gandhi's message in Manipur, linking her spiritual leadership of the Heraka movement with her patriotic identity. Drawing inspiration from Gandhi's national efforts, she motivated her people to resist British rule. Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement inspired Gaidinliu's strategies. She urged the Zeliangrong people to boycott British goods and refuse tax payments, disrupting colonial administration.

Lal Dena, in his book 'History of Modern Manipur' opined that Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress influenced Jadonang's political ideology. During a visit to Surma Valley in Cachar, a center of political unrest in the Northeast, he learned about the national movement. When Gandhi visited Assam in December 1926 and was expected to visit Cachar in January 1927, Jadonang prepared a grand welcome, even organizing a group of 200 students, comprising 100 boys and 100 girls, to dance in his honor. In 1927, Jadonang composed a song paying tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, reflecting the influence of Gandhi's ideals on the Heraka movement. The song gained widespread appeal among the Zeliangrong.

It says,

"Oh Mighty Gandhi,  
Come to rule upon us  
You are the leader,  
You are great,  
Come to rule us." (Asoso Yunuo: 1982, p64)

Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu clamoured for Mahatma Gandhi and his principle of non-violence (ahimsa). On this similar line, she stated, "We are a free people, the white men should not rule over us, we will not pay house tax to the government, we will not obey their unjust laws like forced labour and compulsory porter" (Kabui, Gangumei, 1973, p.492). The Zeliangrong community, fueled by outrage over Jadonang's brutal execution, rallied behind Gaidinliu as their leader, trusting her vision and determination to avenge his death and fight for their rights. (Kabui, Gangumei: 1973, p.492). Fearing the growing rebellion, the British government moved swiftly to quell the uprising and apprehend Gaidinliu.

## PART: II

### *Cultural Revivalism and Identity Reformation: Gaidinliu's Lasting Impact on Zeliangrong Society; Post Incarceration*

After her release, she was initially advised to remain low profile in Nagaland. However, she re-emerged in 1952, returning to her village in Manipur after 20 years in exile. She then actively worked on uniting the Zeliangrong people, comprising the Zeme, Liangmei, and Rongmei tribes, across Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. Rani Gaidinliu stood firm in her conviction, emphasizing the significance of preserving cultural and religious identity, as encapsulated in her powerful statement: "Loss of religion is loss of culture, loss of culture is loss of identity." (Shah: 2017).

Heraka, as a religion, gained its modern elements during the 1970s. The Heraka movement, a cultural revival effort aimed at uniting the tribes, faced significant limitations due to widespread Christian conversions (Niumai, 2018). However, during her post-incarceration period, Gaidinliu's interactions with prominent Hindu leaders led to the integration of Hindu elements into the Heraka tradition, transforming its character. (Babul Roy: 2013) Though the Heraka movement transformed into an organized monotheistic religion after Jadonang's initial efforts. Today, Herakas believe in a single supreme God, reject sacrificial rituals, abstain from beef, and adhere to principles of cleanliness, sin, virtue, karma, rebirth, and a clear concept of heaven and hell. Significant reforms were introduced in the 1970s, particularly after Gaidinliu's 1973 visit to Delhi, during which she met Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Hindu leaders, drawing Heraka closer to Hinduism. According to Zemme, the movement further evolved with the first Heraka conference in 1981, supported by the Indian Tribal Cultural Forum, and culminated in the compilation of Heraka scriptures in 1991. This movement was a driving force into preserving the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Zeliangrong people. The Rongmei Nagas, in particular, adopted Sanskritized practices (Srinivas, 1995) to elevate their social status, adopting names like Rama and Arjun, while retaining their cultural roots and food habits.

(Niumai, 2018) However, "the Zeme, Liangmai, and Npui tribes were more influenced by Western education and Christianity. Despite external influences, these tribes retained their unique socio-religious identity, with women proudly wearing traditional attire, such as phanek and shawls. Followers of Heraka wore an earring as a symbol of their faith." ( Ajailiu Niumai, 2018)

### **Zeliangrong Identity**

The term "Zeliangrong" is a composite name, officially coined on February 15, 1947, during the First Zeliangrong Conference in Imphal, where the Zeliangrong Council was established. It is an acronym derived from the prefixes of the following: Zeme, Liangmei, and Rongmei (including Puimei), reflecting the solidarity of these interconnected tribes. Through the Zeliangrong People's Convention, she even met with India's President, Rajendra Prasad, in Imphal in 1952. William McCulloch, in 1859, described the Zeliangrong polity as a "small republic." Before British colonization, the region was administered by traditional authorities and tribal councils. However, with the British penetration into the area from 1830 onwards, the territory was fragmented and distributed among Nagaland, North Cachar Hills (Assam), and Manipur. This division had a profound impact on the Zeliangrong people and became a rallying point against British rule, fueling the movement. The Zeliangrong people have a distinct character of "culture consciousness" (Gangmumei Kamei, 2004, pp. 302-320); they take pride in their cultural heritage. The community's cultural roots run deep, with traditions that have been meticulously preserved and passed down through generations. These time-honored customs continue to play a significant role in their lives, reflecting their deep-rooted connection to their ancestral roots and cultural identity.

According to Ursula Graham Bower, the Zeliangrong people are characterized by their honesty, stubbornness, conservatism, and credulity. These individuals resisted the British attempt to portray them in a negative light. However, J.C. Higgins, the Political Agent of Manipur, referred to their movement as "Naga Raj" (Kingdom), in the epistle to the Governor of Assam, implying that the tribes were uncivilized and hostile. However, Higgins's goal was to rationalize British military involvement. In response, both of them challenged the British narrative and rallied their people. In his book, "Naga Struggle Against the British Rule Under Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu 1925-1947," Asoso Yonuo writes that during their final meeting at Bhubon cave in January 1931, Jadonang and Gaidinliu developed a practical form of animism centered on the worship of a single God, "Tingwang," characterized by attributes such as omniscience, benevolence, justice, truth, and kindness.

### **Cultural Revivalism**

Central to Gaidinliu's mission was the revival of the Heraka religion, which emphasized monotheistic worship of Tingkao Ragwang and the preservation of Zeliangrong cultural practices. Her efforts countered the erosion of indigenous identity caused by Christian missionary activities, which had gained traction among the Nagas by the 1960s. As Arkotong Longkumer argues, Heraka's focus on "reform" and "identity" negotiated tradition and change, legitimizing indigeneity while challenging Western constructs of religion.

Gaidinliu's Heraka philosophy also embodied traditional ecological knowledge systems, reflecting environmental wisdom integral to Naga culture. Her advocacy for sustainable practices and the preservation of cultural heritage resonates with contemporary debates on environmental policy and climate change. By promoting the Zeliangrong's languages, rituals, and oral traditions, she demonstrated the importance of cultural diversity and exchange, countering the homogenizing forces of colonialism and modernization.

Furthermore, she expressed her apprehension that "In most of the Hill tribal areas of India today, especially in this Purvanchal, a constant and mounting struggle is going on between those who stand for preserving what is best in their ancient traditions for unity and peace among human beings and those, who buttressed and fed by vast amounts of foreign money coming in here through illegal channels in the name of 'humanitarian works' but which is, in fact, utilised to convert our simple tribal people into a foreign dogma." (Asoso Yonuo;1982, pp. 199-207).

She suggested specific measures to save our country, one, the Declaration of India as a Hindu state, and the banning of all conversions from Hinduism to any alien dogma. She further illustrated that here, Hinduism encompasses all the faiths indigenous to India, namely Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, and all other indigenous faiths, resulting in the immediate cessation of vast foreign funds aimed at the maintenance and growth of Churches. Third, the Kohima Station of AIR (All India Radio) should attach at least some importance to our traditional songs and programmes, which may help bring about national integration. She was particularly critical of AIR Kohima's tendency to refer to 'Nagaland' and 'India' as separate, independent entities in its local language broadcasts.

There was widespread uproar throughout the country, particularly in the North-Eastern Region, regarding the Freedom of Religion Bill. In this context, she has issued the following statement on May 8, 1979: "In fact, the Bill never aims at curbing the freedom of religion of any citizen of our country. The Constitution of India has guaranteed freedom of religion to every citizen, and every individual is equally entitled to freedom of conscience, allowing them to choose, profess, practice, and

propagate their preferred religion without restriction. Therefore, the bill only protects these rights in their true spirit by trying to prevent conversion from one religion to another by force, fraud, and inducement, and thus protecting the right to profess any faith with freedom." (Asoso Yunou, 1982, p.199). Moreover, on May 24, 1979, Rani Gaidinliu wrote a long letter to the Prime Minister, Morarji Desai, and the President of India, N.S.Reddy expressed her overall support for the Freedom of Religion Bill, and urged them to halt foreign funding and missionary activities in North-East India that might serve foreign interests under the guise of Christianity". (Asoso Yonuo;1982, pp. 199-207)

However, due to her strong stand for her indigenous religion, she came under a vicious attack from the Christian missionary groups. "Her religious reform movement was not allowed to take off in the Zeliangrong areas of Manipur and Nagaland, where the missionaries had by the 1960s and 70s become well entrenched and organised. Despite all these circumstances, her decision to work in the Cachar hills in Assam amongst the Zemei brought about a drastic change in the region." (Som Kamei:2022, p.208)

#### ***Re-emergence and Revitalization: A significant challenge to the Naga National Council (NNC)***

Released in 1947 after India's independence, Gaidinliu continued her advocacy for a unified Zeliangrong homeland within the Indian Union, opposing the secessionist Naga National Council (NNC). Rani Gaidinliu went underground to mobilize her community against the "Naga National Council (NNC)", later known as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland. Under Rani Gaidinliu's leadership, a unique form of nationalism emerged, deeply rooted in traditional Naga culture. This distinct narrative stood in contrast to the dominant narrative of the Naga National Council (NNC), which was primarily shaped by Christian and Western influences. Heraka's resistance to Christian influence, particularly post-Jadonang, disrupted the unified front of Naga resistance.

Undaunted, Rani Gaidinliu challenged both Britishers and the patriarchal dominance of the NNC. Although her struggle wasn't explicitly feminist, she navigated traditional cultural barriers that restricted women's roles, such as exclusion from decision-making and property inheritance. Through her actions, Rani Gaidinliu inadvertently created space for women to assert their agency and participation. Her commitment to cultural preservation and regional autonomy persisted until she died in 1993.

#### ***Her Accolades***

Rani Gaidinliu was involved with numerous social and cultural organizations. In 1934, she founded the Kabin Samiti, a tribal group. She also served as the President of the All India

Freedom Fighters Association, Nagaland. She was bestowed with numerous prestigious awards. "In 1972, during the silver jubilee celebrations of India's Independence, she was awarded the Tamra Patra as a freedom fighter of India, the Padma Bhushan in 1982, the Vivekananda Seva Suman in 1983, and the Bhagwan Birsa Munda Puraskar in 1996."(Gangmumei Kamei:2004, p.228) She was awarded the Swarna Vivekanand Puraskar and the Bhagwan Birsa Munda Puraskar, worth Rs. 1,00,000, along with a citation. (Gangmumei Kamei:2004, p.241). In 1996, a commemorative stamp was released. Amit Shah, the Union Home Minister, laid the foundation stone for the Rani Gaidinliu Museum in Manipur's Tamenglong district in November 2021. The museum proposal was approved by India's Ministry of Tribal Affairs in 2019. The museum will assist in the preservation and exhibition of artefacts related to the tribal freedom fighters." (Niumai:2018).

#### **METHODOLOGY**

Considering the paucity of research on women's roles in the socio-economy, in art, and in culture, research methodology has evolved considerably over the last few years from broad historical analysis to a more intensive and specialized examination of current problems. Drawing on Quentin Skinner's contextualist approach, Rani Gaidinliu's leadership can be understood as a product of her specific historical and cultural context. Gaidinliu's resistance against colonial rule in Northeast India during the 1930s was rooted in the local culture and context. To comprehend her ideas and actions, it is crucial to situate them within the integrated frameworks of anti-colonial resistance, indigenous cultural revival, and decolonial responses to Western imperialism. Skinner's emphasis on recovering authorial intentions underscores the importance of understanding Gaidinliu's actions as driven by a desire to preserve Zeliangrong traditions, rather than solely by nationalist or modernist ideologies. This nuanced analysis reflects the need to consider the complex matrix between local traditions and colonial administrative structures that shaped Gaidinliu's outlook and actions, eventually providing a richer understanding of her legacy as a champion of indigenous rights and cultural preservation. This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining historical research, an ethnographic framework, and feminist analysis. A content analysis of Gaidinliu's speeches and interactions with national leaders provides insight into her nationalist and cultural vision.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Rani Gaidinliu's life and work inspire social change, promote inclusivity, empower marginalized communities, and preserve cultural heritage. A mystic and virtuous woman, her feminine identity played a vital role in popularizing the Heraka cult and advocating for a Zeliangrong homeland, even after

India's independence. Though she passed away in 1993 in her village in Manipur, her legacy continues to endure, even if her dream of a Zeliangrong homeland remained unrealized. Despite lacking formal education, she remains an enduring icon in Northeast India, celebrated for her courage and leadership.

Rani Gaidinliu's image as an unmarried, independent woman challenges traditional societal norms, which often regard marriage and motherhood as essential for a woman's social acceptance and honor. This aligns with feminist epistemology, which values personal narratives and subaltern voices as legitimate sources of knowledge. Rani Gaidinliu's iconic image is instantly recognizable, serene behind sunglasses, adorned in traditional Rongmei attire, complete with conch shell necklaces and a headscarf, exuding a sense of timeless dignity.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has elevated her image to a divine symbol, and this transformation is meticulously examined in Sajal Nag's book, highlighting the complexities of her legacy. The Sangh Parivar's valorization of Gaidinliu, as noted in *The India Forum*, positioned her as a national icon. Rani Gaidinliu's association with the broader Hindu society is notable, as she became the first tribal leader from the Northeast to be celebrated as a national icon. Her identity as a Hindu is central to the Sangh's narrative, utilizing her quote, "I am Bharatiya... Nagaland is an integral part of Bharatavarsh," to fit her into their Hindutva ideology. She emphasized the importance of traditional medicinal practices, leveraging ancestral knowledge to promote health and well-being.

According to Rongmei Encyclopedia, in 1937, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, then President of the Indian National Congress, bestowed upon Gaidinliu the esteemed title of "Rani of the Nagas", drawing parallels from legendary figures like Joan of Arc and Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi, while affectionately referring to her as the "Daughter of the Hills". Gaidinliu's resistance to British rule and Christian conversion efforts highlights her agency in navigating multiple identities: spiritual leader, freedom fighter, and cultural guardian. Her interactions with national leaders, such as Nehru, as documented in archival correspondence, reveal her influence on India's independence narrative. By centering her experiences, this study decolonizes mainstream historiography, emphasizing the contributions of women and indigenous communities to nation-building.

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