

# Rani Gaidinliu: The Iconic Woman of Northeast India

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## **Abstract**

This article attempts to analyse why Rani Gaidinliu, who was a freedom fighter and social and religious reformer, was keen to preserve the identity and culture of her cognate tribe<sup>1</sup>—the Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmai/Kabui and Npui. Does Heraka—a socio-religious movement started by Haipou Jadonang and later developed by the Rani—become a tool of ‘cultural revivalism’ and act as a means to unite cognate tribes? Why do we juxtapose Heraka with the Hindutva ideologues such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) that position Rani Gaidinliu in a new spirit of nationalism and identity as the lone woman spiritual and political protagonist of Northeast India? She used Heraka with politics to fulfil her goals in fighting the British. Using the interview method, I spoke to selected respondents, particularly elders and community leaders, about Rani Gaidinliu. Her story illustrates a rationality that could encourage marginalised and invisible women to become sociopolitical and spiritual leaders, questioning patriarchy and bringing about empowerment and social inclusion.

## **Keywords**

Identity, culture, community, cognate tribes, religion, Heraka

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## Introduction

During the 1980s, Rani Gaidinliu,<sup>2</sup> adorned in her traditional attire and trademark dark sunglasses, stepped down from a jeep helped by two young Rongmei Naga girls. She was visiting my hometown Tamei in Manipur's Tamenglong district. As a little girl, I vividly remember having mixed feelings of awe and mystification. While growing up, we often heard stories of her bravery—but were sceptical of her socio-religious movement known as Heraka, meaning the pure, immured from other impurities (Longkumer, 2011) propounded by her cousin, the spiritual leader Haipou Jadonang (Kamei, 2004a).

Rani Gaidinliu was born on 26 January 1915 to parents who were from the Rongmei/Kabui tribe in Nungkoa village, Tousem subdivision of Tamenglong district, Manipur (Kamei, 2014). Her staunch opponents labelled her as a magician, mystic, witch, demon-possessed, sorcerer (J. P. Mills, 1932, in Longkumer, 2018) and even a cannibal. While Arkatong Longkumer (ibid.) considered her as a prophetess, Kamei Gangmumei (ibid.) wrote that, in the 1920s, the British political agent to Manipur J. C. Higgins labelled Rani Gaidinliu as a *Maibi* (priestess). Kamei claims that she was much more than a *Maibi* in the sense that since childhood, she grew up as a liberated, courageous and determined girl with mystic power. In a phone interview of 30 December 2017, D. P. Panmei, a personal assistant to Rani Gaidinliu from 1973 to 1975 and chairman of Rani Gaidinliu Memorial Foundation, narrated that when she was born, the umbilical cord surrounded her neck. The *Maibas* (priest) and *Maibis* (priestess) predicted that she would grow up as an extraordinary girl if she did not die. We have oral narratives that are best suited to explain such events in a culture that was adopting large scale literacy. Legend has it that Gaidinliu's life changed at the age of 12 years after she and her elder sister Kiuliamliu met a goddess who resembled her in the paddy field while they were picking chillies. The goddess asked them, 'Are you two alone?' 'What are you doing?' When they replied affirmatively to the first question, she offered to help them in plucking the chillies. Sitting in a hut in the paddy field, the three of them poured the chillies on the ground from their baskets. When the sun set, they collected the chillies and the sisters proceeded towards their home. Just before reaching their village gate, they stopped for a rest. The goddess took out her chillies and distributed it between the sisters. After that, as she disappeared unexpectedly, both the sisters were spellbound and afraid. They decided not to inform anybody about their encounter with the goddess but they were restless and could not sleep that night.

Next day, they went about their usual chores as if nothing had happened. Sometimes, the goddess would appear to Gaidinliu and help her in domestic chores when her parents were away at the paddy field. She maintained a close relationship with the goddess. One day, she was asked to go to the Bhubon cave<sup>3</sup> in Assam. She went to the cave with some village elders where she was given some cups of healing water from the cave. She healed many people by using it and the water was sold to other Naga tribes. Gaidinliu was not only a freedom fighter and socio-religious reformer but also a physician and Maibi.

There are many such 'important' events in Rani Gaidinliu's life, and these have become a part of the storytelling tradition of Naga tribes, passed down through generations. In this process, there must have been elements of interpolation, and the primary orality of the period when these respondents listened to the same is mutated now. It is also because of the elapse of time and the differential needs of the contexts that primary and secondary orality differ. The fact that these narratives are privileged in the indigenous understanding shows the vitality of the culture and of oral transmission.

The central purpose of this article is to examine how Rani Gaidinliu attempted to preserve the identity and culture of her people, namely, Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui Naga tribes spread across Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. Traditional beliefs stated that these cognate tribes are the progenies of three brothers, namely, Magangtoubou, Kadingbou and Renbangbou, who were descendants of Munhu-Nguiba from Makuilongdi village, Senapati district in Manipur. The tribe of the first son who moved to the North is known as Zeme and that of the second son who stayed in Makuilongdi village is the Liangmai tribe, while the third son who went to the South founded the Rongmei/Kabui tribe (Miri, 1991). Their leaders held a meeting and formed a common nomenclature for these cognate tribes as Zeliangrong, which is a prefix of the Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei/Kabui tribes. The term Zeliangrong is not recognised as that of a tribe, but rather it is perceived as a social organisation and union of these tribes. In December 2017, when I interviewed Athuibou, an ex-MLA of Manipur Legislative Assembly and elder of the community, recounts:

The Npui tribe also attended the meeting in 1947 but their prefix or suffix was excluded in the term Zeliangrong. Npui leaders raised their concern but majority of the leaders ignored their objection. There was persistent pressure to include them for many years but in vain. Eventually, they detached from the Zeliangrong in 1995 after their efforts did not yield any result.

Earlier, the Zeme and Liangmai were recognised as Zeliang in Nagaland and Kacha Naga (Elwin, 1969; Grierson, 1903) in Manipur. The Rongmei/Kabui (Hodson, 1911; Watt, 1887) is a recognised Scheduled Tribe in Manipur. The Government of Nagaland recognised Rongmei as a Naga tribe on 4 August 2012 but withdrew the recognition on 3 June 2017 (*Morung Express*, 2017). The Npui Naga tribe suffers from an identity crisis since they are identified as Rongmei/Kabui Naga tribe due to their assimilation with the latter tribe. The councils of these cognate tribes petitioned the Government of India for their separate recognition and were ultimately recognised as the Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Npui Scheduled Tribes with the passing of the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Act, 2011, in the Parliament in December 2011 (*The Gazette of India*, 2012).

## Methodology

In this study, the qualitative method was employed through the interview method. The elders and community leaders who knew the two legendary figures, Rani Gaidinliu and Haipou Jadonang, were purposively selected for this study. Some respondents hail from Tamenglong, Tamei, Imphal and Kohima. Individual interviews were held between 2015 and 2017, mostly at the residence of the selected respondents, and a few others were interviewed online. Thus, the recollection was mediated by many years having passed in the history of Naga societies, leaving room for newer counter-memories. Secondary sources consulted include journals, newspapers, documents, websites and books pertaining to Rani Gaidinliu, Haipou Jadonang and the cognate Naga tribes. Since the exercise involved interviews about incidents that have taken place many decades ago, memory studies<sup>4</sup> was one of the aspects that were taken into account as a method. The difference between primary and secondary orality was the distinguishing factor.

## Rise of Rani Gaidinliu as a Political Protagonist

British political agents first came to the area in 1832 where many cognate tribes lived in a political expedition assisted by the Maharaja of Manipur, which resulted in the suppression cognate tribes as Kabui and

Kacha Naga (Johnstone, 1896). Haipou Jadonang was born in 1905, at Puiuan (Kambiron) village on the old Cachar road. He witnessed the repression by British officers who used the local people as porters or Pothang Bekahri/Pothang Senkhai—equivalent to forced labour and coerced every household to pay revenue tax of ₹3 per annum (Kamei, *ibid*). Jadonang introduced Heraka, a synthesis of Christian monotheism and Hindu temple culture. He discovered the ancient holy cave of Lord Bishnu in the Bhubon hills cave and worshipped him and one supreme God—Ragwang (Kamei, 2004b) or Tingwang. Heraka is a reformed indigenous religion that worships Tingwang through prayers, singing of hymns and songs. Jadonang abolished several taboos and gennas and spearheaded the construction of temples (Kalumki or Kahumki) with a shrine, pulpit and aisles of bamboo. Heraka attempts ‘to overcome evil spirits and to erase the memory of sacrifices and evil spirits’ (Longkumer, 2011, p. 213). They used an earring as a symbol of Heraka believer.

Although Jadonang began his movement as a socio-religious reform movement, he focused on the freedom of his people and challenged the oppressive British regime (Yonuo, 1982). He met S. C. Booth, the Sub-divisional Officer, but refused to salute the British officer and in 1926, it landed him in Tamenglong jail for a week. He slowly organised and trained a youth armed force called Riphen with a strength of about 500 men to fight the British (Kamei, 1997). His followers showed allegiance to his movement by contributing cows or bulls and cash. From 1926 to the early 1930s, Jadonang attempted to preserve the distinct identity and culture of his community and he dreamt of his people living together in one geographical state. Through their widespread intelligence network, the British became alarmed about Jadonang’s movement and looked for ways to eliminate him.

Rani Gaidinliu came to know of Jadonang through dreams that lead her to visit him at Kambiron, Assam. They were related through the Pamei exogamous clan. Their relationship as the master and disciple cemented between 1926 and 1927 and she became his trusted lieutenant. Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu eulogised Mahatma Gandhi for his principle of non-violence (*ahimsa*). Jadonang even composed a song in honour of Gandhi. In his letter on insurgency in the Naga Hills of Manipur to the Governor of Assam, J. C. Higgins the political agent of Manipur termed the cause for the Zeliangrong people as Naga Raj (Kingdom). Higgins used the term Naga Raj pejoratively to prove that these tribes have low acumen and were antagonistic but dared to challenge the British and therefore, the British government should supply military forces and

resources to tackle them (Kamei, 2004a). This pejorative dimension was countered by Jadonang and Gaidinliu use of cultural resources such as language of dreams and mysticism, neither of which was alien or strange to the indigenous discourse—even though it was rejected by ‘others’.

Asoso Yonuo (1982) asserts that Rani Gaidinliu rose as a spiritual and political leader after the British hanged Jadonang on 29 August 1931 at Imphal, Manipur on charges of treason against four Meitei (Manipuri) traders who were killed in Longkao (Nungkao) for violation of an important social taboo in which he had no role. This taboo and genna were observed by the villagers where people were prohibited from lighting a fire or cooking food inside or outside the village on certain days. However, these four Meitei traders violated the prohibition. Jadonang was framed as the culprit after a farcical trial and the British hanged him as a pre-emptive measure. Jadonang was given little chance to prove his innocence. His trial for the alleged murder was politically motivated as the prosecutor, judge and the police was all rolled into one man namely J. C. Higgins (Kamei, *ibid.*). The British intimidated some followers of Jadonang to testify that their leader was the one who ordered the murders of Meitei traders revealing thereby that the trial was orchestrated to create communal disharmony between the Meiteis and Jadonang’s community. According to some community leaders, the British also attempted to send across the message to Jadonang’s followers that they would meet the same fate if they continue to revolt against them.

Yonuo also notes that Jadonang invented his own script—though this was considered as too crude and unintelligible to be used for preserving Naga language and culture. He wrote his ideas and songs in this script in a book, which was taught, to his followers. In order to let the British authorities know about his invention, he wrote a letter to the Sub-divisional Officer, S. C. Booth, at Tamenglong Headquarters who tore it in up in disgust, considering it an illiterate young man’s ideas and script. Others may not understand what Jadonang wrote in a book, but his writing was a form of protest against the British rulers. His intention was to show that he was at par with the British in writing and his community was not lesser than any civilised people.

During her childhood, Rani Gaidinliu did not attend any formal school like other girls since there was no school in her village or area. However, she was keen to write although the British rulers later questioned her skill of writing. Her inspiration to write a script came from her master Jadonang. Arkatong Longkumer (2018) cited J. P. Mills who kept Rani Gaidinliu’s 12 notebooks and unflatteringly described them as:

magic books of the sorceress Gaidinliu [*sic*] captured with her other property in March 1932. The writing is apparently nothing but meaningless scribbling. She is a Kabui girl of no education at all and taught herself to scribble. Her literary power gave her immense prestige and she used to send written messages to her adherents—with verbal messages to say what they meant (JPM 5/18/32).

Longkumer has pointed out that most of these notebooks found at Pitts Rivers Museum (PRM) at the University of Oxford have English names and some have Bengali writing in them. He mentions that two of the notebooks have a photo of Mahatma Gandhi on their cover that suggest that Rani Gaidinliu either procured the exercise books from local bookshops or borrowed them from friends or that she herself attended one of the government and Christian mission schools in the region. From a young age, Rani Gaidinliu was gifted with natural leadership and good communication skills; the environment had motivated her to fight against the British rulers (Yonuo, 1982).

When I interviewed D.P. Panmei, he recounted:

She [Rani Gaidinliu] was aware of the impending plan of Jadonang and she was determined to strive for it by even risking her life. The British ordered security operations and deployed the Assam rifles in the most affected areas in Manipur hills, North Cachar [N.C.] hills and Naga hill districts. On 16th March 1932, the followers of Rani Gaidinliu led by Mr Heungchang attacked the Assam rifles outpost at Hangrum, N.C. hills. To avenge them, the British carried out intensive military operation and Rani Gaidinliu was arrested on October 17, 1932 from Pulwa village, Peren district, Nagaland. She was put to trial and sentenced to life imprisonment on 7th March 1933. Till 1940, her followers continued the movement. The British burnt and destroyed properties of her followers and some of them were tortured and killed. For almost 15 years, she spent her youthful life in jail, tortured and harassed by the British rulers. The Governor of Assam rejected her petition for mercy. Jawaharlal Nehru was shocked; he was very impressed when he met her in 1937 in Tura jail and Nehru gave her the title 'Rani'. He attempted to release her through British MP, Lady Nancy Astor. But, the Secretary of State refused to release her, as she would pose a danger to the British. Finally, she was released in 1947 after India's independence.

Panmei said that Jawaharlal Nehru wrote a piece in the *Hindustan Times* in 1937 about Gaidinliu's story and her bravery,<sup>5</sup> and she gradually gained recognition among her people as Rani Gaidinliu. She understood the power of confrontation and successfully mobilised people (including girls and women) to join her army. She fought the oppressive British

rulers that used even girls and women from her community as forced labour without payment.

The cognate tribes launched a Zeliangrong movement under the banner of Zeliangrong People Convention (ZPC) after Rani Gaidinliu was released from the jail. However, the Zeliangrong movement was not integrated with the Naga movement and its demand for Naga sovereignty as envisioned by A. Z. Phizo. The cognate tribes were neither a signatory to the memorandum submitted by the Naga Club to the Simon Commission nor took part in A. Z. Phizo's plebiscite in 1951 for independence of the Naga people. They were not included in the proposed idea of 'unified Nagaland' as demanded by the Naga Peoples' Convention (NPC) in 1957. The leaders of NPC only demanded unification of the Tuensang division of North Eastern Frontier Agency and not any Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur (Nag, 2002). Rani Gaidinliu even went underground to organise her community to fight against the Naga National Council (NNC; later National Socialist Council of Nagaland). Under her leadership, nationalism based on traditional culture emerged as an alternative force to the NNC-dominated Naga nationalism based on Christianity and Western culture (Stracey, 1968). Her nationalistic ideas were in direct conflict with NNC-inspired Naga nationalism. This rivalry between the two views of Naga nationalism, however, gradually died down following the surrender of Gaidinliu and her followers in 1966 (Singh, 1995). Being an opponent of NNC, she managed to portray herself as a true Indian nationalist. Paochunbou an NGO activist and elder of the community said, 'she was provided a bungalow, security guard, and VIP status but to be confined to Kohima, Nagaland with a pension of ₹15 per month'. Gradually, she built a relationship with Indira Gandhi, Morarji Desai and Rajiv Gandhi. Rani Gaidinliu also built a rapport with the BJP and its allies Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) to enhance her political goal of achieving a homeland for her community. Unfortunately, the policy of isolation, exploitation and exclusion of these tribes continued even in independent India reducing them to ethnic minorities. They continue to have the arbitrary boundaries superimposed upon them by the British and after Independence, by the Government of India, that has assigned them under different administrative units in Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. Separated in this manner, the tribes have had contrasting experiences and aspirations as well as centripetal and centrifugal tendencies among themselves.



## Rani Gaidinliu: A Spiritual and Cultural Revivalist

Although Rani Gaidinliu emerged as Heraka's spiritual head, many followers of Jadonang ceased to practise Heraka after his arrest and execution. For her, however, 'Loss of religion is loss of culture, loss of culture is loss of identity' (Shah, 2017). Rani Gaidinliu is known to have healed the sick through the healing waters collected from Bhubon cave as well as attempted to revive indigenous cultural practices such as traditional dance and folk songs, and she tried to bring about various reforms and unity among her community. Initially, she taught her followers to offer animal sacrifices to gods, goddesses and spirits but later she discouraged animal sacrifices to gods, goddesses and spirits. When I did my fieldwork in May 2017 and interviewed people who knew Rani Gaidinliu, Ajonliu, a 96-year-old woman was one of the respondents who had a first hand experience on Rani Gaidinliu. She said:

I was an ardent follower of Rani Gaidinliu when I was a small girl. We used to follow her Heraka spiritual teachings and performed dances in our traditional attire to appease the evil spirits along with our village folk singers. Earlier, we offered sacrifices of buffaloes, chicken and the like to our village deity for every occasion. But she discouraged this from 1990 onwards. She also taught us to worship the almighty God—Tingwang.

I interviewed Chaoba Kamson at his residence in Imphal, Manipur in May 2017 where he narrated the following:

I have worked with Rani Gaidinliu. One day, I stayed at her official residence in Kohima in Nagaland and found her in a trance where she spoke to herself for more than an hour. When I broached this to her personal assistant, I was told that she was communicating with her God. This incident affirmed to me that she was a deeply spiritual woman with mystical power.

Some members of her community believed that she was an *avatar* of goddess Cherachamdinliu who possessed supernatural power. Under Rani Gaidinliu, Heraka became an influential tool to reach out to various cognate tribes and it thrived among the Zeme and Rongmei Nagas. More than other tribes, the Rongmei Nagas became Sanskritised (Srinivas, 1995) in order to enhance their social status and mobility but did not desert their non-vegetarian food habits and drinking of 'jou' (rice beer). New born infants were given local Sanskritic Meitei names like Ram, Arjun, Shyam so as to let the youngsters fit into a predominantly Hindu society. However, the Zeme, Liangmai and Npui were not strongly influenced by

the process of Sanskritisation but rather more by Western education and Christianity. In spite of the overwhelming influence of Sanskritic, Western and Christian influence on these tribes, they still retained the basic elements of their socio-religious lifestyle. Women proudly wore their traditional shawls and *phanek* aka *mekela* (wrap around skirts) throughout the year with the men occasionally donning traditional costumes mostly on festive occasions. The mantra of Heraka, a tool of 'cultural revivalism' attempted to act as a charm to unite these cognate tribes but could not achieve its goal as the majority has been converted into Christianity. This period can be contextualised as an 'open moment' when different religious possibilities were available: Christianity was one possibility and it was a success. Heraka was also another possibility but did not succeed. Today, there is no open moment as the 'Great Tradition' of the Nagas draws considerably from Christianity.

## **Exclusion and Unwarranted Perception of Rani Gaidinliu**

Since majority of the Naga tribes have been converted into Christianity in the 20th century, they felt enlightened, globalised and modernised in contrast to Rani Gaidinliu, who propagated her indigenous religion Heraka. She crusaded against conversion to Christianity, leading her critics, particularly the NNC leaders, to think of her as backward, and one committed to indigenous religion, Heraka. It is true that Rani Gaidinliu reached out to associate with Hindutva ideologies like the VHP and RSS, stressing revival of culture, ethnic identity and working against conversion to Christianity. She used her political influence to pursue the Zeliangrong movement and since her ideas did not fit into mainstream Naga thinking, she was an irritant for the Nagas at large. Thus, she was labelled a witch, demon possessed, sorcerer, magician and cannibal. Interestingly, Naga scholars refrained from putting such stories received through elders and others into writing; however, some youths criticised and labelled her a witch, demon-possessed, sorcerer, magician and cannibal in the social media instruments such as Facebook. This was especially in 2015 after the BJP-led government proposed to construct a library-cum-memorial museum to mark Rani Gaidinliu's birth centenary in Kohima, Nagaland. Women who are popular in some cultures are labelled heretics like Joan of Arc in France.

The following narratives and fond reflections substantiate the fact that Rani Gaidinliu was a kind-hearted woman who loved her community,

identity and culture and left a substantial legacy. In an interview, Indian Postal service officer Som Kamei said:

My father Gangmumei Kamei worked closely with Rani Gaidinliu. One day, while I was a student during the late 1980s, she invited me to her room in Manipur Bhavan, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi and encouraged me to work hard and gifted me some cash which reveals her humane and maternal traits.

In another interview, Rev Dr Daisok Panmei, Senior Pastor of Miami Baptist Church, Logansport, Indiana, USA, said:

I was born and partly raised in Kohima, Nagaland where Apei (Grandmother) Rani Gaidinliu used to live. She christened me Daisuaklung that means great and big and forever with prayer and love. My name is unique since I have not come across anyone so far by the same name. My paternal and maternal grandmothers lived in Manipur and as I did not get to see them, I considered Rani as my own dear Apei. I saw her almost every day for one year while I was studying in Class 2 at Minister Hill English School, Kohima. I remember vividly to this day, how I used to run down to her house (official quarter allotted by the Government) during my school break (since her house was just below our school) to see her, and enjoyed her treats. When she saw me coming, she would take me to her lap and treat me with some kind of orange candies and tell some stories that I truly enjoyed. Before I got back to school, she would put her hands over my head and bless me. She would see me off, making sure that her maids filled my pockets with some pears from her garden. That was just few of the many ways she made me feel special. My strongest memory of a smile on her face was the day I told her that I'd met a special girl at school. She chuckled and winked with joy when I told her about the girl I had a crush on.

No matter what and who she prayed to, the Rani was deeply spiritual and treasured life and its simple pleasures. She dearly enjoyed spending time with children and making each of us feel special. Though Apei was barely 5 feet tall, I looked up to her, even after the momentous day when I surpassed her in height. I still bear the name that she gave me.

Such narratives are also that last generation of oral tales that was one of the main activities in the Naga villages and which is almost dead according to Tezenlo Thong and it is through this oral rendering that the cultural process is furthered through the generations, which is unfortunately becoming extinct (Thong, 2016).

## **Rani Gaidinliu: A Warrior**

In spite of facing struggles and challenges as a member of the second sex (De Beauvoir, 1949), Rani Gaidinliu fearlessly fought against the British colonial rulers as well as the patriarchs of the NNC. Though she did not consciously identify feminism and gender in her spiritual and political struggle, she was well aware of the traditional cultural barriers between men and women in her community. For instance, customary law and culture prohibits women from participating in the decision-making process, inherit immovable property and fight with weapons at war against the enemies. Maitreyee Chaudhuri (2003) argues that the economic and political spheres are 'alien' spaces women have to enter; the 'home' is the 'natural' realm where women already exist. Her arguments hold true for Naga women as for centuries, they were never encouraged to be involved in political spheres although they 'administered' their homes. Rani Gaidinliu had gone beyond traditional norms since she rejected a marriage proposal (Kamei, *ibid.*). In other words, she considered her 'calling' (Weber, 1919) to be higher than settling down to have children and be confined within a domestic space.

The British used their authority and power, status and patriarchal privilege to continuously exploit and suppress the cognate Naga tribes. Rani Gaidinliu had the conviction to mobilise her army and fight the oppressive colonial system. The patriarchal and oppressive methods of the British of using forced labour, collecting revenue taxes per house in every village, feasting at the expense of the poor villagers, constructing inter-village roads and bungalows made of bamboo and thatch roofs for Britishers to stay for a single night in the village free of cost had a profound impact on Rani Gaidinliu, she became aggressive and militarised, fighting for social justice of her people. Paochunbou, an NGO activist and elder of the community recounted:

In 1924, the British official Mr William Shaw visited my village Konphung in Tamei sub-division, Tamenglong district, Manipur. Whenever the track to the village was rough to walk on foot, the villagers who accompanied William Shaw made a bamboo palanquin and carried him on their shoulders. Seeing such rampant oppressive practices of the British in villages, Rani Gaidinliu managed to send across the message to her people that achieving freedom from the British was a larger goal than educational, economic, political, cultural and social equality with men.

As she struggled to achieve her goal, hundreds of young girls and men are said to have come to the fore and stood by her side. I interviewed D.P. Panmei in May 2017 in which he said:

The fighting men smuggled arms and ammunitions from Cachar by carrying these on bullock carts covered by racks and dead cows or bulls and passed over Jiri Ghat. The British police posted at Jiri Ghat did not stop the bullock carts and they crossed the Jiri river successfully.

Rani Gaidinliu and her women warriors may have suffered hunger, thirst and harsh weather as the men did but they learned to wield the *dao* (sword), spears and the like. She may have also raised questions about her own and other girls' femininity and sexuality—whether men were attracted to her/them and how to tackle such situations. Regarding her relationship with the girls in her army, she managed to forge close bonds with them. She gained respect from both men and women who shared a common purpose. In due course of time, she must have overcome the gender differences since she marched, organised ambushes and fought along with men and also tasted the joy of victory and shared the sorrow of betrayal and defeat. Rani Gaidinliu's act of arming girls with the *dao* is another example of taking from the cultural resources of the cognate tribes; this is relevant given the singular lack of political participation of Naga women in post-colonial times.

Another peculiar characteristic of Rani Gaidinliu was engaging young 'virgin girls' as her close aids or maids or nurses. Paochunbou, an elder of Liangmai Naga tribe and who met Rani Gaidinliu a couple of times when she was alive narrated the following in December 2017:

She believed that her deity would not accept her freedom movement unless her nurses and maids are virgins. It was believed that she knew whether the young maid girls were virgin or not because her dream or vision would reveal about the girls' virginity. She had conviction that unless the girls are virgins, she would be defeated in the fights against the British ... She managed to recruit and convince her followers that the British guns would turn into water while facing her. She often camped at a huge cave in Mount Kisa which could accommodate around two hundred people near Magulong village inhabited by the Zeme tribe, Tamenglong district, Manipur.

Catriona Child, daughter of Ursula Graham Bower, the British Anthropologist who worked among the Zeme Nagas in North Cachar and was a V-Force guerrilla fighter against the Japanese in Myanmar during the Second World War, reflected:

My mother visited Magulong village where Rani Gaidinliu used to often hide from the British rulers and take shelter with her followers. Ursula was perceived by some Zeme Nagas as an avatar of Rani Gaidinliu, who was at that time in prison. The villagers assumed that their Rani Gaidinliu, who

possessed mystical power, had come back to them as a fair-skinned lady. During the war, my mother was nicknamed 'The Naga Queen' by soldiers of the Allied army, because of her close friendship with the Zeme Nagas.<sup>6</sup>

This statement unquestionably proves that Rani Gaidinliu's community perceived her as their mystical leader. Perhaps, she realised that her followers might withdraw in a possible fight against the British. Hence, she may have stated that guns would turn into water in order to create a sense of confidence among them.

Warfare is perceived to be a critical aspect of masculinity (Enloe, 1983, 2004), a part of the patriarchal ideological structure in every culture. However, involvement of women in warfare changes the notion of masculinity to a certain extent, even though the majority were not at the top of hierarchical structures but remained at the bottom. Rani Gaidinliu's experiences as a woman warrior made her feel prepared for anything and that she became more confident after taking a role in her community's history was evident. She became more courageous, realised the shortfalls of the British rulers and reacted to the enormously patriarchal character of the colonial authority's approach towards her community. Her feminine identity as a chaste and mystic woman was critically significant during the struggle against the British as it shaped her efforts to popularise the Heraka cult and demand for the Zeliangrong homeland even after India's Independence. Under her influence, the Zeliangrong movement was strengthened. However, Rani Gaidinliu passed away in 1993 at her village in Manipur without achieving her vision.

## **Conclusion**

Rani Gaidinliu became a legend for being committed, determined and convicted for her tireless efforts to pursue her dream of the Zeliangrong homeland. She strategically combined the Heraka religion with politics to fulfil her goals in fighting against the British rulers. Her story illustrates a rationality that would encourage marginalised and invisible women to become leaders in both socio-political and spiritual spheres. Such empowerment would bring about social inclusion and supersede patriarchal structures at home as well as in the public space. She showed how her community in particular and the Nagas could integrate with mainland India. Rani Gaidinliu managed to encourage her people to preserve their traditional and cultural heritage as she stood at the

intersection of many important events such as religious currents the Naga movement and the freedom struggle. While the Rani may not have had educational qualifications and her goal may not have been planned professionally, she still remains an icon in the Northeast India. Rani Gaidinliu gave her people a sense of identity and left a legacy, a memory that the region could produce one of the most courageous women freedom fighters.

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### **Notes**

1. People of a tribe or group descended from a common ancestor.
2. Jawaharlal Nehru met Gaidinliu in 1937 at Tura Jail in Shillong and was greatly impressed. He gave her the title 'Rani' (Queen in Sanskrit and Hindi) and gradually, she gained popularity as 'Rani Gaidinliu'.
3. Bhubon cave in Assam is significant because Jadonang and Gaidinliu are reputed to have received their vision and direction from Tingwang or Ragwang (Almighty God) and the spirit who dwells there.
4. The method of memory studies employed here involves matching common data from the present interviews that are known as a representation of secondary orality along with the largely held views of the contemporary period and any reminiscences of the same by the informants as primary orality. The second aspect in this method involves eliminating interpolations and other intrusions like loan words of a later vocabulary. The ideas that emerged after this filtration process is considered as relatively reliable memory. The method is based on the concept that memory is not static but dynamic and is vulnerable to change. Therefore, these changes reflect later interpolations that are not part of the original memory and this method involves retrieving the original memory. Memory studies is primarily used as part of oral history based on experiences of Africans in America and pre-literate societies. The seminal text informing the study was Paul Thompson's (1978) *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*.

Rani Gaidinliu was honoured as an India's freedom fighter and awarded Padma Bhushan, Tamra Patra Freedom Fighter Award in 1972, Birsa Munda Award posthumously and Vivekananda Sewa Samman in 1983 and Stree Shakti Puraskar award in 1997. She was also honoured with a postage stamp of ₹1 by the Government of India in 1996. In 2010, the Hindustan Shipyard Ltd launched a shore patrol vessel named after her at Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh (Kamei, *ibid.*). On 24 August 2015, the BJP government launched a commemorative coin of ₹100 and circulation coin of ₹5 to mark Rani Gaidinliu's birth centenary celebrations (Retrieved 29 June 2018, from <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/statue-of-rani-gaidinliu-to-be-installed/article6832012.ece>).

5. See also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rani\\_Gaidinliu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rani_Gaidinliu)
6. Retrieved 29 June 2018, from <http://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/entertainment-others/woman-who-came-in-from-the-wild-ursula-graham-bower-4792719>

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