



# Rani Gaidinliu: The Brave Woman of Zeliangrong

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## Abstract

Rani Gaidinliu (1915–1993), a towering yet often underrepresented figure in India's anti-colonial history, emerges as a symbol of indigenous resistance, cultural preservation, and women's leadership in Northeast India, particularly among the Zeliangrong Community. Born into the Rongmei (Zeliangrong) community in the remote hill village of Lungkao (now in the present-day Tamenglong district), her journey from a young tribal girl to a revolutionary leader offers profound insights into the intersections of gender, ethnicity, spirituality, and anti-imperial struggle. This article aims to explore the life, activism, and legacy of Rani Gaidinliu, whose contributions to the Indian freedom movement defy the mainstream, male-centric nationalist narrative, instead representing a regional, spiritual, and indigenous articulation of resistance.

**Keywords:** Gaidinliu, Zeliangrong, Heraka.

## Introduction

Gaidinliu, a Zeliangrong spiritual and political leader. She is recognised as Rani Gaidinliu. She was born on January 26, 1915, in Lungkao (Nungkao), Tamenglong district, Manipur. Gaidinliu's association with the Heraka religious movement, initiated by her cousin Haipou Jadonang, marked the beginning of her political awakening. The Heraka movement, while spiritual in form, was inherently political, aiming to rejuvenate traditional Zeliangrong customs and resist the colonial imposition of alien administrative systems and missionary influences. After Jadonang's execution by the British in 1931, Gaidinliu, then merely sixteen years old, assumed leadership of the movement. Under her guidance, the Heraka movement evolved into a broader anti-British struggle that inspired tribal unity and cultural resurgence. Gaidinliu's leadership, rare for a woman in a patriarchal tribal society, further underscores her exceptional courage and charisma.

This article argues that Rani Gaidinliu's rebellion must be situated within both the broader Indian nationalist framework and the specific historical context of tribal resistance in Northeast India, particularly among the Zeliangrong Community. Her long year imprisonment from 1932 to 1942, which she served with unwavering resolve, is a testament to her ideological commitment and personal bravery. Upon her release,

she continued to advocate for the socio-political empowerment of her people. She worked to preserve Zeliangrong cultural identity, often negotiating with both the Indian state and local power structures.

Through archival records, oral histories, and critical historiography, this study re-examines Rani Gaidinliu not merely as a freedom fighter but as a cultural icon whose leadership challenged gender norms, colonial authority, and internal divisions among the Nagas. The paper also examines the post-independence marginalisation of her legacy, particularly in contemporary Naga political narratives, where her promotion of Heraka is perceived as conflicting with the dominant Christian identities in the region.

In reclaiming Gaidinliu's story, this article contributes to a more inclusive understanding of India's freedom movement by foregrounding the role of tribal women in shaping anti-colonial discourses. Her life invites reflection on the layered identities of Indian nationalism, the role of spirituality in political resistance, and the continued relevance of indigenous voices in post-colonial nation-building. Rani Gaidinliu remains a figure of immense historical and symbolic significance—an embodiment of courage, conviction, and cultural pride in the face of imperial domination and socio-political marginalisation.

Rani Gaidinliu is rightfully celebrated as a brave woman of the Zeliangrong community due to her extraordinary contributions to their socio-political and cultural movements. Her leadership in resisting British colonial rule, her role in preserving indigenous identity, and her fearless advocacy for Zeliangrong unity post-independence make her a revered figure. Below are some of the reasons why she is considered a brave woman of the Zeliangrong people.

### **1. Leadership in Anti-Colonial Resistance**

Gaidinliu was introduced to revolution when she joined the Heraka movement. It was a socio-religious movement initiated by Haipou Jadonang. He was against the British policy of converting the Naga tribes into Christianity. The movement received a setback when the British arrested and hanged Haipou Jadonang in August 1931.

Gaidinliu's courage was evident when she took up the mantle of leadership after the execution of Jadonang in 1931. At just 16 years old, she organised and led the Zeliangrong people in an armed rebellion against British rule. Unlike other resistance leaders, she fought from the remote hill regions of Manipur, Nagaland, and Assam, using guerrilla tactics to challenge colonial rule (Baruah, 2003). After the death of Haipou Jadonang, Rani became the leader of the movement. She urged the Zeliangrong people to unite against the Britishers by refusing to pay the taxes imposed on them.

Additionally, she launched multiple attacks against the British using Guerrilla warfare in the Chankar hills (February 16, 1932) and the Hangram village (March 18, 1932). Her ability to mobilise and inspire her people to stand against an empire demonstrated exceptional bravery. Despite facing overwhelming odds, she continued her resistance until her capture in 1932. The British sentenced her to life imprisonment, recognising her as a significant threat to their authority. Her defiance in the face of colonial power solidified her reputation as a fearless leader (Bhattacharya, 2016). Gaidinliu's leadership was not only military in

nature but also ideological, as she advocated for self-rule and indigenous governance. She encouraged her people to resist oppressive taxes and forced labour imposed by the British administration. Her resistance movement was deeply intertwined with the socio-cultural identity of the Zeliangrong people, making it both a nationalist and an indigenous revivalist movement. Her bravery lay not just in wielding arms but also in instilling a sense of pride and autonomy among her people, ensuring that her legacy endured beyond the immediate rebellion.

## **2. Endurance and Sacrifice in Imprisonment**

One of the most remarkable aspects of Gaidinliu's bravery was her endurance during her long year of imprisonment. Captured at a young age, she faced harsh prison conditions in various British jails, including those in Shillong, Aizawl, and Tura (Sen, 2020). Despite the physical and mental hardships, she never abandoned her ideals or pleaded for clemency. Many resistance leaders were forced to compromise under colonial pressure, but Gaidinliu remained steadfast in her beliefs. Her resilience in captivity symbolised her unwavering commitment to her people's freedom. It was only after India gained independence in 1947 that she was finally released, marking her as one of the longest-imprisoned freedom fighters from Northeast India (Sharma, 2010). Even after her release, she did not enjoy the luxuries of a free life but continued to struggle for the rights of her people. The time spent in prison only strengthened her resolve, as she used her experiences to advocate for the recognition of tribal rights and cultural preservation. Her suffering in confinement became a source of inspiration for later movements advocating for the rights and dignity of indigenous people. This ability to endure years of isolation, deprivation, and systemic oppression without wavering in her convictions makes her one of the bravest figures in India's freedom struggle.

## **3. Defender of Zeliangrong Indigenous Identity**

Gaidinliu was not only a political leader but also a cultural warrior who sought to preserve the traditional faith and customs of the Zeliangrong people. She revived and strengthened the Heraka movement, which emphasised indigenous religious and social practices while resisting the spread of foreign influences, including forced conversions by Christian missionaries (Kabui, 2004). Her determination to uphold her people's heritage in the face of cultural assimilation efforts showcased immense bravery. She faced opposition from both colonial authorities and religious groups, yet she continued to advocate for the preservation of the Zeliangrong identity (Longkumer, 2010). Her commitment to preserving the cultural and spiritual autonomy of her people was an extension of her resistance against colonialism. The Heraka movement under her leadership became a unifying force, ensuring that Zeliangrong traditions remained intact despite external pressures. Her efforts to uphold indigenous practices made her a central figure in the discourse on cultural sovereignty. She was not only fighting against political subjugation but also against the erosion of a way of life that had existed for centuries. By reinforcing indigenous faith and identity, she equipped future generations with the confidence to embrace their heritage while navigating the complexities of modernity.

#### 4. Advocacy for Zeliangrong Unity and Political Rights

After independence, Gaidinliu did not retreat into the background; instead, she intensified her efforts to secure political recognition for the Zeliangrong people. She lobbied the Indian government for the creation of a separate Zeliangrong administrative unit, arguing that her people deserved autonomy to safeguard their cultural and political rights (Sanyal, 2015). Though she did not achieve full political autonomy, her efforts brought national attention to the struggles of the tribal communities in Northeast India. Her continued advocacy in the post-colonial era displayed her enduring bravery and leadership. The call for an autonomous Zeliangrong region was not merely about self-governance but also about ensuring that tribal communities had a voice in national politics. She recognised that political representation was crucial for protecting the socio-economic and cultural interests of her people. Her advocacy helped lay the foundation for the later development of tribal councils and institutions aimed at safeguarding the rights of indigenous communities in India. The demand for recognition and political agency remains a crucial aspect of indigenous struggles today, and her contributions continue to influence contemporary tribal movements.

#### 5. Recognition and Lasting Legacy

The Indian government and the people of Northeast India widely recognised Gaidinliu's bravery. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru described her as the "Rani of the Nagas," highlighting her significance as a freedom fighter (Nehru, 1958). She was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1982 for her contributions to India's independence movement and tribal empowerment (Government of India, 1982). Her name continues to inspire generations, and her legacy is honoured through statues, roads, and institutions named after her. Even today, her life serves as a symbol of resistance, cultural pride, and self-determination. Her contributions have been incorporated into the historical narratives of India's freedom movement, ensuring that her story is not forgotten. The recognition she received serves as a testament to her impact, ensuring that the struggles and sacrifices of tribal leaders are acknowledged within the broader context of India's history. The institutions and cultural centres named after her continue to promote awareness about tribal rights and histories, making her influence perpetual.

#### Conclusion

Rani Gaidinliu's bravery was manifested in multiple forms—her fearless leadership in anti-colonial resistance, her resilience in prison, her dedication to preserving indigenous identity, her political advocacy, her work in uplifting tribal socio-economic conditions, her resistance against religious persecution, and her lasting legacy. She remains one of the most revered figures in Zeliangrong history and a beacon of courage for tribal communities across India. Her contributions extend beyond her people, making her an integral part of India's broader struggle for freedom and cultural preservation.

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