International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Impact Factor: 6.8
Volume-XII, Special Issue, April 2026, Page No. 453-464
Published by Scholar Publications, Sribhumi, Assam, India, 788711
Website: http://www.ijhsss.com
DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss.vol.12.issue.specialW.313

From the Margins to the Frontlines: Gendered Histories of Anti-Colonial Struggles in North East India

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Received: 06.04.2026; Accepted: 09.04.2026; Available online: 10.04.2026

Abstract

Women's studies, as a field of academic inquiry, has long occupied a marginal position within mainstream scholarship. For a considerable period, historical writing, research, and curricula largely neglected women's experiences, roles, and perspectives. The emergence of women's studies must be understood within the context of this exclusion, as an intellectual and political effort to foreground women's voices, particularly those belonging to oppressed and marginalised communities.

This paper focuses on two notable female figures from Northeast India, Rani Gaidinliu of Manipur and Joya Thaosen of the North Cachar Hills, who played significant roles in the anti-colonial struggles against British rule. Challenging both patriarchal constraints and the limitations imposed by their geographical location, these women mobilised resistance grounded in indigenous identity as well as a broader nationalist consciousness. The study argues that their leadership not only contributed to the wider struggle for independence but also marked an important shift in gender relations within tribal societies of the region.

Keywords: Joya Thaosen, Marginalised women, Northeast, Rani Gaidinliu, Resistance movement

Gender studies in India, and more acutely in Northeast India, remain an underexplored domain. Their development necessitates a historiographical intervention through the recovery and re-inscription of women's subjectivities in history, an epistemological precondition for the production of gendered knowledge. Swami Vivekananda held that "All nations have attained greatness by paying proper respect to women. That country and that nation which do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever be in the future".[1] James Mill's 1817 assertion in *The History of British India* that a society's level of civilisation could be gauged by the status of its women effectively embedded women into the narrative of modernity and the emerging historiography of India. With that single claim, the categories of "women," "modernity," and "nation" became tightly interwoven within a civilisational discourse.[2] As Samita Sen observes, this formulation propelled the "woman's question" to the forefront of public debate for over a century, transforming it into a central axis of colonial and nationalist engagement. It became a symbolic site where modernity was negotiated and political authority was justified.[3]

The colonial period is considered a watershed in gender relations. It was a time when modernity began to take shape through both colonial influence and indigenous efforts. By the late 19th century, the domestic sphere, especially the home, was reimagined as a site of nationalist resistance against colonial intrusion. How did women respond to the new possibilities unfolding before them? The boundaries of the household, once rigid and confining, suddenly seemed to dissolve, while structures of feudal domination long regarded as permanent were not only questioned but actively resisted. The vision of a new, socialist society appeared on the horizon, and women were urged to step beyond domestic confines to share in the responsibility of building a world where men and women would stand as equals. Women have become aware of their revolutionary potential through ideas, movements, and institutions largely shaped by men. Our self-understanding is rooted in societies governed by masculine authority and cultural norms, and even our visions of change are framed within male-defined revolutions. Terms like "brotherhood" and the liberation of "mankind" obscure women's presence and agency.[4] This deeply ingrained subordination remained invisible until the women's liberation movement exposed it.

In the nineteenth century, gender became central to debates on social change. It was not a question of "what do women want?" but rather "how can they be modernised?" Geraldine Forbes argues that colonial rulers introduced novel conceptions of women's roles and capacities, which were subsequently adopted by progressive Indian thinkers. For a long time, the narrative of women's history in British India was framed as a gradual journey toward modernity, emerging from a prolonged phase of decline and inertia.[5] Both British missionaries and Indian reformers, eager to critique their own society, invoked the idea of a bygone "golden age" that had since deteriorated into centuries of moral and social decay. Indian literary and religious texts often portrayed women in idealised terms: as loyal and self-sacrificing figures, yet also as potentially defiant and perilous. Gerda Lerner, a trailblazer in American women's history, famously declared, "Women have a history, women are in history," a statement that became a rallying cry for rethinking gender narratives.[6] Women have historically been excluded from contributing to the formation of history, both in structuring and in interpreting the human past. Because this act of meaning-making is central to building and sustaining civilisation, women's exclusion from it has placed them in a distinct and marginalised position. Across time and cultures, women have been systematically barred from contributing to the development of symbolic systems, philosophical thought, scientific inquiry, and legal frameworks. Not only have they experienced pervasive educational exclusion, but they have also been systematically barred from participating in the production of theoretical knowledge.

Among 19th-century reformers, Rammohun Roy is widely recognised as a pioneering advocate for women's rights. He has been celebrated by historians as the "father of modern India," a "champion of women's rights," and even as a feminist.[7] From a feminist lens, Geraldine Forbes critiques the historical framing of a "golden age" followed by a "dark age" as overly simplistic and analytically flawed. While such binaries obscure the complexities of women lived experiences across time, they nonetheless served a strategic purpose.

Partha Chatterjee observes that while Indians actively embraced modern domains such as science, technology, rational economic practices, and Western political institutions, they simultaneously upheld the domestic sphere as the repository of authentic cultural identity.

The world is portrayed as the external realm, governed by material pursuits and pragmatic concerns, a space often associated with men. In contrast, the home symbolises the inner, spiritual self, embodying one's true identity. It is envisioned as a sacred sanctuary, untouched by the corrupting influences of the material world. Within this framework, the woman becomes the emblem of the home, representing purity and moral constancy in opposition to the worldly domain.[8]

Women's studies and feminist movements, in their effort to craft empowering historical narratives, risk oversimplifying and idealising the figure of the 'model woman'. This approach can inadvertently validate the frameworks through which reformist and nationalist discourses historically addressed the "woman question". Instead, a more nuanced recognition that certain ideological openings have enabled women's agency, women's consciousness often surpasses the boundaries of the very ideologies that shape it. Crucially, caste and class continue to be formative forces in this process.[9]

The nationalist movement's tendency to construct an inspirational past suggests that feminism must distinguish itself by critically engaging with its own ideological inheritances. From the 1920s onward, the Indian National Congress began actively collaborating with peasant, labour, and women's groups to showcase widespread public support. This engagement led to the social validation of women's political involvement, significantly reshaping the dynamics of the women's movement. The most constructive aspect of reform lies not in its capacity to define women's roles, but in the contradictions and tensions it generates. The tensions between ideological claims and lived realities created space for women to redefine their identities and engage in new forms of political action. Mahatma Gandhi expanded the boundaries of protest by bringing practices traditionally associated with femininity, such as satyagraha and non-violent resistance, into the centre of nationalist politics. This shift has often been interpreted as a "feminisation" of political struggle, as it facilitated wider participation by women and enabled their large-scale entry into the movement.[10]

In his early contributions to *Young India*, Gandhi articulated a vision in which women were to participate alongside men in the struggle for independence. However, he was critical of movements that prioritised women's suffrage alone, believing that such demands could divert attention from the overarching objective of national liberation. He instead called upon women to channel their efforts into supporting the collective anti-colonial struggle.

More broadly, the trajectory of social reform, whether driven by colonial officials, indigenous reformers, or nationalist leaders, provides limited grounds for optimism, as it consistently operated within patriarchal frameworks and remained closely linked to the redefinition and regulation of women's roles in society. Two important questions emerge here: first, in the face of conservative and anti-feminist resistance, how can reform and change progress when they are constantly challenged? For instance, even reforms justified through religious texts, such as banning sati or permitting widow remarriage, faced fierce opposition. Second, reform movements have seldom set out to confront patriarchy in isolation; instead, they have tended to reconfigure it by embedding it within evolving social hierarchies, both inherited and emergent, as well as changing political arrangements.[11] Consequently, any attempt to dismantle patriarchy in a meaningful sense would necessitate a far-reaching transformation of the social order itself.

Both oral accounts and documentary evidence indicate that women took part in the struggle in considerable numbers. Yet written narratives typically frame their involvement in two limited ways: either as marginal, supportive actors or as exalted icons of resistance. Neither representation does justice to the layered and often contradictory experiences reflected in women's own accounts. While it is clear that women stood alongside men in struggles over land and against feudal domination, such broad assertions risk flattening the specificity of their participation. Their engagement cannot be reduced merely to reactions against worsening material conditions or threats to livelihood; it was shaped by more complex social and political impulses.[12] It is possible that the expectation of impending transformation, or the erosion of established norms, prompted women to act in ways that differed fundamentally from men. For men, the weakening of feudal authority largely meant relief from exploitation, coercion, and forced labour. For women, however, it also signalled the possibility of a reconfigured social world, one that might allow greater equality within both domestic and public spheres.[13]

This shift in women's consciousness did not arise automatically from their participation; rather, it developed gradually, influenced by the interplay of economic conditions, cultural practices, and the dynamics of the struggle itself. Many women entered the movement with enthusiasm, embracing a chance to step into a public arena from which they had long been excluded. Over time, however, they came to recognise something that is also evident in retrospect, that structures of power had not disappeared but had instead assumed more subtle and less visible forms of control.

Paradoxically, although women have often been positioned as bearers of tradition, with social order tied to their conformity and moral regulation, their most significant gains have frequently occurred during periods of conflict and upheaval. It is in such moments, when established systems of surveillance and discipline are unsettled, that women have been able to assert themselves, expanding their roles and opportunities in ways not ordinarily available. To sustain their political engagement during such struggles, it became necessary to dismantle aspects of feudal ideology that had long confined and oppressed them. Drawing on Benedict Anderson, Tanika Sarkar argues that nationalism generates a form of political attachment expressed through the idioms of kinship and home, in which the figure of the mother occupies a central place.[14]

Rani Gaidinliu:

On a quiet winter day in 1915, in the Kabui Naga village of Lungkao, nestled along the Cachar-Imphal road, a girl named Gaidinliu was born into the Pamei clan, one of the ruling lineages of the region. She was the fifth child of Lolthonang and Kocotlenlu, and like many girls of the Zeliangrong community, she grew up in the traditional dormitory where young women were taught the rhythms of daily life: tending fields, weaving cloth, and expressing their heritage through song and dance.

But fate soon intervened. A grave illness struck Gaidinliu in her youth, prompting her family to seek help from Jadonang, a healer of great repute, known for his mastery of medicinal herbs and spiritual insight. In Kabui tradition, such figures were called *muh*, guardians of both body and soul.[15] Her father carried her to Kambiron village, where Jadonang lived. During her brief stay, something stirred within her not just recovery, but revelation. Captivated by Jadonang's presence and teachings, Gaidinliu asked to remain and serve as a *maibi*, a priestess within his temple. That moment, likely in 1926 or 1927,

marked the beginning of a profound spiritual and ideological journey. Certain accounts indicate they were kin, perhaps cousins, but their bond transcended blood. Guided by Jadonang, she joined a movement that reformed their animistic faith by blending it with Vaishnavite Hinduism. Ritual sacrifice gave way to new forms of worship, and spiritual renewal became a vehicle for political awakening.

Jadonang's vision extended beyond religion. He dreamed of unity and resistance of a "Kabui Raj" that could uplift the marginalised and challenge colonial rule. Within his temple, he created a space for women to lead and inspire. Gaidinliu rose to oversee this unit, nurturing cultural pride through music, dance, and discourse. Eventually, she underwent the *Ralen Loumei* ritual, ascending to the role of *Muhpui*, a full priestess, no longer just a follower, but a torchbearer of a rising movement.[16]

Asoso Yonou interprets the Gaidinliu Movement of 1931 as a foundational moment in the emergence of Naga nationalism. He presents the movement as follows:

> Just after the arrest and imprisonment of Jadonang, the charismatic leadership of the animistic Naga freedom movement had passed to his young cousin sister, Miss Gaidinliu, who had just crossed sixteen years and her height five feet four inches, having a fair complexion and beautiful Mongolian features. She was painful, bitter and unhappy to see that her Naga people were being ruled by the foreigners, and the Christianized Nagas had drifted away from their own animism and adopted an alien religion. So, in order to arouse their feelings and thoughts into bright consciousness for preservation of animism, she called upon the people to cultivate strong and religiously based nationalism.[17]

He argues that the movement catalysed a deliberate revival of Naga animistic traditions, positioning them in direct contrast to the expanding influence of Christian missionaries and the increasing conversion of Nagas to Christianity under colonial auspices. The Gaidinliu Movement of 1931 marked a pivotal moment in the emergence of "Naga nationalism", serving as both a spiritual resurgence and a political awakening. Moreover, the colonial administration's preferential treatment of the Kukis, coupled with the strategic alliances forged between Meiteis and Kuki immigrants, further exacerbated tensions and fueled the unfolding conflict. This alliance intensified tensions, particularly as Kuki settlements encroached upon Zeliangrong Naga territories, disrupting long-standing landholding systems and compelling shared occupancy. The situation escalated during the Kuki Rebellion of 1917-1919, when Kukis reportedly carried out violent attacks against Zeliangrong communities, including the revival of old age headhunting practices.[18]

Determined to carry forward Jadonang's vision, Gaidinliu sought to free her people from British colonial rule and the growing influence of missionaries, while preserving the *Heraka* faith as a symbol of purity and resistance. She proclaimed that her people were inherently free, urging them to reject colonial domination by refusing to pay taxes, *Pothang Begari* (forced labour), *Pothang Senkhai* (monetary levies on villages to provide hospitality to touring officials and carry their baggage) or obey corrupt *lambus* (officials) who served the British. Revered as a spiritual liberator, she was honoured with a house and temple at Lungkao. Following in the footsteps of her Guru Jadonang, she spearheaded vigorous campaigns against the oppressive house tax, a levy the tribal communities, still reliant on barter, perceived as deeply unjust. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's Civil Disobedience

Movement, she assured her people that British rule would fall under Gandhi's leadership. Songs composed by Jadonang and by herself became rallying cries of resistance. In one of her own appeals, she invoked Gandhi in a moving song:

ApaoGandhi-pu-no, haigong Lemkhung
Pat-ti kheijo, pat-ti Kheijo
So putli putlo, so putli putlo
Pat-ti ane putlo Aho
(O Father Gandhi, come to this land,
Teach your ideals to us,
Show your dignity to this land,
Hurry, hurry, spread your ideals on us.)[19]

Declaring her mission divinely ordained, Gaidinliu inspired village after village, with followers offering resources and young men enlisting in her militia. She took complete charge of the Riphen force, appointing Haidua of Tamenglong as its General, with key support from figures such as Masang Ghumeo, Dikheo of North Cachar, and the woman commander Areliu.[20] Under her leadership, all able-bodied men were trained in the use of arms, an intelligence network kept watch on British movements, and the customary exchange of spears served to cement alliances between villages. Travelling widely across Manipur, the Naga Hills, and North Cachar, she not only oversaw the restoration of desecrated temples but also mobilised the Zeliangrong community against colonial taxation and forced labour, fostering a sense of unity in defence of both autonomy and cultural identity.

At the same time, the British administration intensified efforts to capture Rani Gaidinliu, perceiving her expanding influence and anti-colonial activities as a serious challenge to their authority. Under the direction of J. P. Mills, a coordinated operation was set in motion, involving the Assam Rifles, the Manipur administration, and officials from Haflong. This campaign aimed to dismantle her growing no-tax movement, which had spread across Manipur, the North Cachar Hills, and the Naga Hills. To curb the uprising, the authorities established military posts, carried out extensive search operations, and imposed strict restrictions on village mobility.[21] In regions of western Manipur, considered her stronghold, the British adopted particularly severe measures, including collective fines, confiscation of weapons, and the destruction of villages.

Nevertheless, despite sustained efforts by the colonial state, Gaidinliu managed to evade arrest for a considerable period. Guided by Masang of Kipeilua and protected by a network of loyal supporters who carefully concealed her whereabouts, she remained beyond the reach of British forces for years. One can rightly place Amit Kr. Nag's interpretation here, who described her evasion as "She came and went like a ghost."[22] Her photo was circulated across Manipur, the North Cachar Hills, and the Naga Hills, with a reward raised from Rs. 200 to Rs. 500 and villages promised ten years' tax remission for providing information. Frustrated by their limited success, the colonial authorities began portraying her movement as a cult, alleging its association with practices such as devil worship and human sacrifice.

On 16 February 1932, a significant confrontation took place at Hangrum village in the North Cachar Hills between the forces of Rani Gaidinliu and British troops. During the encounter, the Assam Rifles set fire to the village and its granaries, leading to loss of life,

widespread hunger, and harsh reprisals against those who survived. Recognising the seriousness of the situation, the Assam government, in March 1932, informed the Government of India that:

> The cult which Gaidinliu revived has clearly spread over large areas of Manipur, the North Cachar Hills, and the Naga Hills, and unless Gaidinliu and her party can be captured, there is a grave danger of a serious outbreak. The Governor-in-Council had therefore sanctioned organised operations to round up Gaidinliu and her party.[23]

On 16 February 1932, Jamadar Kujimon Chetri of the 3rd Assam Rifles, while on patrol near Hangrum, came upon a concealed structure in the forest after observing a group of Nagas hastily leaving the jhum track. He subsequently reported having seen Rani Gaidinliu on 17 March, when her followers launched an attack with spears, compelling the police to respond with 14 rounds of gunfire. Even then, she succeeded in evading capture once again. Ursula Graham Bower later likened the pursuit to "something almost comparable to the hunt for Prince Charlie."[24]

In the early hours of 18 March, shortly before dawn, an estimated 50-60 Naga fighters, armed with spears, daos, bamboo stakes, and a few firearms, launched an assault on the Assam Rifles camp at Hangrum. After disregarding repeated warnings, they were met with sustained gunfire,128 rounds in total, resulting in six deaths and three injuries among the attackers.

At the same time, Dr Haralu, a recent convert to Christianity influenced by missionary activity, stood in opposition to the Jadonang-Gaidinliu movement. He believed that the future of the Naga people lay in the adoption of Christianity, formal education, and modern administrative systems. Aware of his position, the British authorities recruited him to obtain intelligence on Gaidinliu, devising a plan that involved a staged marriage proposal and the promise of a reward of Rs. 700 for information leading to her capture. Two armed Kuki groups, led by Haokamang and Changsen *Mauzadar*, pursued Gaidinliu in Manipur's hills. Following the interrogation of captured informants, British forces under Commandant McDonald received intelligence indicating that Gaidinliu was hiding at Hailung's residence in Pulomi village. Acting on this information, the unit proceeded with strategic caution and entered the village in a coordinated operation. On reaching the village around 4:30 PM, they interrogated local headmen and surrounded the house where Gaidinliu was hiding.[25] Though she and her followers initially resisted with traditional weapons, they surrendered when faced with superior British arms. Urged on by her associate Namteihing, Rani Gaidinliu openly declared her identity at the moment of capture. She was taken into custody by Nepalese naik Bir Bahadur Thapa, who subjected her to humiliation during the arrest. Although she resisted with determination, she was eventually overpowered and detained along with her young nephew, a boy from Kambiron, another from Bopungwemi, two men from Lalongmi, and one from Hangrum.[26]

In an effort to instil fear among the local population, the authorities paraded her in chains. She was formally charged under Sections 302 and 108 of the Indian Penal Code on 11 January 1933 and, on 7 March, was sentenced to imprisonment. Rather than being transferred to Manipur, the Deputy Commissioner kept her confined in Kohima jail for two months, as her testimony was required in proceedings against those accused of

assisting her. The colonial administration remained wary of her capacity to inspire renewed unrest among the Kacha Nagas, which led to her repeated transfers between prisons and her treatment as a dangerous offender, often denied even basic amenities. In total, she spent 14 years in incarceration.[27]

During the provincial elections of 1937, Jawaharlal Nehru, then serving as Congress President, came to learn of her struggle while travelling through the Surma Valley. Profoundly affected, he began recording her story during the journey, and these writings were later published in newspapers such as the *Hindustan Times*. Nehru also took steps to raise her case in Britain, appealing to Nancy Astor to bring attention to her imprisonment in Parliament. In 1938, he further commemorated her in a piece titled "Gaidinliu Rani" in the Congress Newsletter, underscoring both her resistance and the injustice of her continued detention under colonial rule.[28]

Joya Thaosen:

Joya Thaosen was born in 1925 at Jorai Bathari village to Jmangdao Thaosen and Surudi Langthasa in the North Cachar Hills. Shortly after Joya was born, she was orphaned at an early age and subsequently brought up by her aunt and uncle. Hailing from the Dimasa community, Joya drew profound inspiration from the storied heritage of her ancestors, particularly the indomitable spirit of Sambudhan Phonglo, whose resolute resistance to British colonial rule in the North Cachar Hills became a symbol of indigenous defiance and cultural pride. Despite her modest background and limited education, she emerged as a leader of the "Bla Zlik" or "Revolutionary Dimasa Army", a party of armed revolutionaries which she organised alongside Arjun Langthasa and Jaotedao Kemprai. Their resistance was directed towards challenging exploitative colonial policies, particularly the forced requisitioning of food grains for war supplies.[29] By mobilising villagers from Pidik, Langri, Sampardisa, Gambari Bedang, Amrudisa, Khepre, Koladisa, and Diyung, Thaosen sought to challenge British authority while aligning her struggle with the vision of the *Azad Hind Fauj.*[30] Sajal Nag situates that the wartime conditions of the Second World War, especially the Japanese advance into Northeast India, profoundly reshaped the political atmosphere of the hill regions, sharpening and accelerating anti-colonial sentiment. Within this context, the Indian National Army (INA) aligned itself with the Japanese forces under an arrangement whereby it would support their military operations with an estimated strength of 30,000 troops, and subsequently assume control once British authority had been displaced. In line with this understanding, INA units participated in the Burma campaign alongside the Japanese and later moved toward Imphal and Kohima, engaging British forces on Indian territory. [31]

Joya in Subhash Chandra Bose's Rani Jhansi Regiment:

The idea of gender equality in Subhas Chandra Bose's political thought found concrete expression in the formation of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. Formulated as part of his broader military plan to secure India's freedom through an advance via the Northeast, the regiment highlighted not only the strategic importance of the region but also the critical role of women in both the anti-colonial struggle and the remaking of society. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Subhas Chandra Bose repeatedly emphasised the need for women's active participation in the national movement. After his return to Asia in 1943, he took the

bold and unconventional step of inviting women to enlist in the Indian National Army (INA) as combatants, an idea that was strikingly ahead of its time.

At the inauguration of the training camp for the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, the women's wing of the INA, on 22 October 1943, Bose delivered a powerful address urging Indian women to enter the freedom struggle with the same resolve, bravery, and sense of purpose as men. He declared:

> "Sisters! The opening of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment Training Camp is an important landmark in the progress of our movement in East Asia. We are engaged in the great task of regenerating our nation. And it is only in the fitness of things that there should be a stir of new life among our womenfolk. Our past has been a great and glorious one. India could not have produced a heroine like Rani of Jhansi if she did not have a glorious tradition. In the same way, as we have figures like Maitreyi in the ancient days, we have inspiring examples of Ahalyabai of Maharashtra, Rani Bhawani of Bengal, and Razia Begum and Noor Jehan who were shining administrators in recent historic times prior to the British rule in India. I have every confidence in the fertility of the Indian soil. I am confident that India, as in the past, will surely produce the best flowers of womanhood."[32]

The Rani of Jhansi Regiment, commanded by Captain (later Lieutenant Colonel) Lakshmi Swaminathan, emerged as an exclusively women's combat unit, the first of its kind in Asia, and constituted a vital component of the INA, which fought alongside the Axis powers during the Second World War. In a speech delivered in Singapore on 9 July 1943, Subhas Chandra Bose outlined his concept of "total mobilisation" of resources across East Asia, explicitly calling for the creation of a women's corps inspired by the bravery of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi. The regiment formally came into being on 12 July 1943 in Singapore with an initial group of just twenty recruits. Its ranks, however, grew swiftly as Bose travelled through Rangoon, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Shanghai, Nanking, and other centres, combining fundraising efforts with active mobilisation.

At its height, the regiment included close to 1,500 women drawn from diverse religious, social, and occupational backgrounds viz Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians, as well as members of elite circles, plantation labourers, and migrant communities. When the Indian National Army advanced from Burma into Northeast India in mid-1944, the women of the regiment took their place alongside male soldiers, confronting the same dangers and sustaining comparable losses. During the subsequent retreat, they undertook gruelling marches covering nearly a thousand kilometres without any preferential treatment, thereby reflecting Bose's insistence on parity in both sacrifice and participation. In some of Lakshmi Sahgal's own writings, Bose's opinion on women is reflected as such:

> Women, who formed half of our population, could not be ignored and had equal rights. He stressed the fact that Indian women had two things to fight for. The freedom of our country and our own emancipation from obscurantist and feudal ideas, which have subjected women to every kind of social, economic and political exploitation.[33]

The militarisation of women under the Rani of Jhansi Regiment must also be situated within the broader trajectory of women's activism in the national movement, where their

participation spanned both Gandhian non-violent struggles and revolutionary armed initiatives across India, including the Northeast. As Radha Kumar notes, women's participation in the early decades of the twentieth century was generally limited to supportive roles, including offering shelter, spreading propaganda, and mobilising financial resources.[34] From the 1920s onward, however, their involvement began to shift more decisively toward active participation in revolutionary movements and even armed struggle. In a related context, a recent poll conducted by the National Army Museum identified the Battle of Imphal-Kohima as the most decisive engagement in British military history.[35]

Significantly, the symbolic appeal of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment found a distinct echo within the Dimasa community of Assam. In the spring of 1944, as the Indian National Army (INA) moved toward Kohima in its campaign against Allied forces, a Dimasa woman leader, Joya Thaosen, along with 54 companions, set out to align themselves with this wider anti-colonial mobilisation in Northeast India. Their effort, however, took a tragic turn. On 7 April 1944, British forces ambushed the Dimasa group at the Khirem-Khowai range near Dimapur in the Naga Hills. In the ensuing encounter, she was killed while actively participating in the fighting, embodying the same spirit of resistance that had drawn her toward the INA's advance.

Joya's death represented a major loss not only to her immediate circle but also to the broader resistance unfolding across the Naga Hills. Several of her associates suffered in the aftermath; among them, Arjun Langthasa was seriously wounded during the attack.[36] The repercussions extended beyond the battlefield, as her family and village later faced social ostracism. Although the Revolutionary Dimasa Army did not succeed in achieving its immediate objectives, Joya Thaosen's leadership reflected a deep and enduring commitment to the nationalist cause, standing as a striking instance of armed resistance led by a woman in the region.

Her ability, as a young woman from a geographically remote and socially marginalised background, to conceptualise and carry out a militant campaign aligned with the vision of Subhas Chandra Bose underscores the broader yet often neglected range of women's participation in the freedom struggle. Her actions demonstrate that women's political and military engagement extended well beyond the established centres of nationalist activity, challenging dominant narratives that have frequently overlooked such contributions. In foregrounding women as active combatants, Bose articulated a vision that likely resonated with figures like Thaosen, who chose resistance over accommodation with colonial rule, even at the cost of social exclusion for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Conclusion:

Women such as Rani Gaidinliu and Joya Thaosen from Northeast India occupied a crucial place in the anti-colonial struggle, signalling a clear shift from the region's predominantly male-centred social order. Gaidinliu, in particular, emerged as a formidable spiritual and political figure, rallying tribal groups, especially the Zeliangrong Nagas, against British authority through the Heraka movement. Beginning her political engagement at a young age, she combined guerrilla resistance with acts of civil disobedience, ultimately enduring fourteen years of imprisonment for her steadfast opposition to colonial rule. In a similar

vein, Joya Thaosen mobilised the Dimasa community by organising the "Revolutionary Dimasa Army" and spearheading armed resistance until she died in 1944.

Both figures moved beyond the constraints imposed by customary gender roles, assuming positions of leadership that were rarely accessible to women in their societies. In doing so, they not only confronted colonial domination but also challenged entrenched patriarchal norms that confined women to domestic spaces and subordinate status. Their actions disrupted prevailing assumptions about women's roles, demonstrating their capacity for political leadership, military engagement, and collective mobilisation.

The example they set resonated beyond their immediate contexts, encouraging later generations of women to step outside restrictive social expectations and participate more actively in political and cultural movements. Their contributions reflect a broader shift within the Northeast, where women increasingly asserted their place as equal participants in struggles over identity, autonomy, and self-determination. Through their leadership and sacrifice, Gaidinliu and Thaosen forged a lasting legacy, one that continues to inspire marginalised communities and women across India in ongoing efforts toward social justice and equality. Their participation in the freedom movement thus represents a decisive breakthrough, marking a moment that disrupted long-standing patriarchal silences and widened the scope for women's involvement in resistance politics.

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