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Exploring the Unsung Heroines of Northeast India with their Contribution to the Freedom Movement

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Abstract: The contribution of women in India's independence movement has been widely recognized; however, the roles of women from the northeastern region are often overlooked in mainstream historical narratives. This study investigates the lives, challenges, and legacies of the overlooked heroines of Northeast India who were instrumental in anti-colonial struggles, social reform, and the preservation of culture. The research aims to analyze how these women—hailing from various ethnic, linguistic, and tribal backgrounds—navigated their roles within patriarchal societies while challenging British colonial rule.

The research uses a qualitative and descriptive approach, incorporating the analysis of historical documents, field interviews, and content analysis of oral histories, archival sources, and existing literature. It centers on case studies from Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim to offer a regional perspective on women's resistance. The study employs feminist historiography and postcolonial theoretical lenses to explore historical accounts that have frequently marginalized women's voices.

Findings of the study reveals that women like Kanaklata Barua, Rani Gaidinliu, Ka Phan Nonglait, and many unrecognized tribal leaders made significant contributions as guardians of indigenous identity and communal resilience in addition to serving as warriors and reformers. Rather than individual bravery, their involvement was motivated by cultural sovereignty, spiritual belief systems, and group unity. The study concludes that building a more inclusive and decolonized view of the liberation movement requires incorporating these regional narratives into mainstream Indian historiography.

Keywords: *Unsung heroines, Northeast India, Freedom movement, Feminist historiography, Indigenous resistance*

1. Introduction

The Indian Struggle of Independence has been widely chronicled in textbooks and popular memory—with symbols such as Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose, and the Indian National Congress dominating the narrative landscape. Yet, within these dominant accounts, the contributions of women from borderland regions—particularly the eight states of Northeast India—remain largely

invisible. Historical scholarship has tended to focus on major urban centers and the so-called heartland, marginalizing both region and gender in the process (Nath, 2018). The present study therefore tries to illuminate one such neglected dimension: the ways in which women from Northeast India not only participated in but shaped anti-colonial resistance and the struggle for independence.

The socio-cultural and political landscape of Northeast India, which includes Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim, is unique. In contrast to the mainland, it has a distinct timeline of integration into the Indian nation-state, ethnic variety, tribal identities, and frontier contacts with colonial rule. Both marginalization and resistance were brought about by these circumstances. Gender, ethnicity, geography, and colonial status were all axes of identity that women in these settings had to navigate. Therefore, their anti-colonial action necessitates a region-specific interpretation that emphasizes cultural, spiritual, and community-based means of resistance rather than being merely added to mainstream narratives.

This study aims to answer the following core questions: Who were the key unsung heroines of the Northeast, and what were their contributions? What forms did their participation take—both in highly visible acts like protest and martyrdom and in less visible cultural, spiritual, or community-based resistance? And how might their inclusion in historiography help reconstruct a more inclusive Indian freedom narrative? The objectives are therefore threefold: (1) to identify and document the lives of selected women freedom fighters from the region; (2) to analyze their mode of resistance in the context of gender, ethnicity, and colonialism; and (3) to argue for the reintegration of these narratives into the mainstream historiography of India's freedom movement.

Preliminary findings suggest that the women of Northeast India made distinctive contributions to the freedom struggle, albeit in forms often unrecognized. In Assam, for example, the young martyr Kanaklata Barua became a symbolic figure of defiance in the 1942 Quit India Movement when she led a procession and was killed while attempting to hoist the tricolor. ([Assam Info][1]) At the same time, women in tribal communities combined nationalist fervor with preservation of indigenous identity and cultural autonomy.

The act of hoisting the national flag or organizing protest marches was thus interwoven with the defense of land, custom, and community. Still, the relative absence of these women from mainstream historical accounts reflects structural biases—colonial archives often recorded them as part of male-led processes or neglected them entirely; post-colonial historiography often replicated these omissions.

Besides, the study underscores the significance of context: the frontier conditions of Northeast India meant that women's mobilizations were shaped by different triggers—forest land encroachment, colonial taxation, forced labor, missionary interference—than the classic narratives of non-cooperation and civil disobedience in the Gangetic plains. The gendered dimension of the resistance area was also distinct: women did not simply support male combatants but often led local committees, organized boycotts, disseminated nationalist literature, and in some cases served as couriers or guerrilla messengers. This positioning blurs the boundary between the domestic sphere and political activism, illustrating the multifaceted nature of resistance.

In fact, reintegrating the narratives of these women into India's freedom story is not merely an act of historical recovery but an exercise in decolonizing historiography—in acknowledging that the nation was not formed only through the actions of well-known leaders and in prime locations, but through countless regional, gendered, and culturally situated struggles. By recognizing the heroines of the Northeast, this study contributes to a broader agenda of gender-inclusive and regionally plural historiography, reinforcing that the freedom struggle was diverse in actors, geographies, and forms.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To document and analyze the contributions of women from Northeast India to the Indian independence movement, with particular reference to those whose roles have

been marginalized or overlooked in mainstream historiography.

2.2 To examine the socio-cultural, political, and colonial contexts within which women from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and tribal communities of the Northeast participated in anti-colonial resistance and social reform.

2.3 To explore the challenges faced by these women in negotiating patriarchal social structures while simultaneously resisting British colonial authority.

2.4 To assess the role of women as custodians of indigenous identity, cultural sovereignty, and community resilience, beyond their participation as political activists or revolutionaries.

2.5 To apply feminist historiographical and postcolonial perspectives in reinterpreting historical narratives and recovering women's voices from archival records, oral histories, and regional sources.

2.6 To present comparative case studies across the Northeastern states — Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim—in order to highlight both regional specificity and shared patterns of women's resistance.

2.7. To contribute towards a more inclusive and decolonized understanding of India's freedom movement by integrating the histories of Northeastern women into the broader national narrative.

3. Literature Review

The historiography of India's freedom movement has undergone substantial revision in recent decades, yet several gaps remain—most notably the marginalization of women's contributions and the under-representation of peripheral regions such as the Northeast. This review provides three strands of scholarship: (1) women's participation in the Indian nationalist movement, (2) scholarship on Northeast India's colonial encounter and resistance, and (3) feminist and postcolonial frameworks that inform the recovery of subaltern and gendered histories.

3.1 Women in the Indian National Movement

Early work on women in the Indian freedom struggle largely focused on well-known figures from the Bengal and Bombay Presidencies, treating their role as supplementary rather than central (Kumar, 1993; Forbes, 1997). These research demonstrated that women took part in picketing, boycotts, and the positive initiatives of the Mahatma Gandhi era, but they were frequently restricted to supporting roles. More recent scholarship has sought to integrate women's activism as integral to nationalist processes. For instance, Nath (2018) argues that the exclusion of women from mainstream narratives is rooted in patriarchal archival practices and androcentric historiography. The implication is that the freedom movement must be viewed not as a male-dominated process but as a gendered field in which women both challenged and reproduced normative gender roles.

3.2 Northeast India: Colonial Encounter and Resistance

Studies relating to the Northeast are still relatively rare, despite the wealth of research on the mainstream freedom struggle. In the context of Assam, Nath (2018) and Pegu (2023) highlight how Assamese women took part in the nationalist movement—challenging colonial rule, mobilizing local resources, and engaging in protest actions. Pegu's (2023) article, "The Role of Assamese Women in the Indian Freedom Struggle: A Brief Historical Analysis," uses archival records and oral narratives to show how women such as Kanaklata Barua, Bhogeswari Phukanani, and Chandraprabha Saikiani inspired regional youth and created female public spaces during 1920–1947. ([Kuey][1]) Nath's (2018) earlier article, "Assamese Women in the Freedom Struggle of India: A Gender Perspective," explores how women in Assam broke traditional gender barriers by joining pickets and boycotts, yet their contributions were considered extensions of

domesticity rather than political agency. ([IJECE][2])

The colonial and postcolonial dynamics in the Northeast differ markedly from those of the Gangetic plains. For example, the frontier nature of British rule in Assam and neighboring states meant that women's activism intertwined with questions of land, missionization, and tribal autonomy rather than simply national political leadership (Sarkar, 2024), ([asssr.in] [3]). In the broader Northeast context, examinations of women in insurgency, conflict, and peace-making highlight how women navigated multiple roles—victim, combatant, caretaker, and mediator (Singh & Hassan, 2018), ([Directory of Open Access Journals] [4]). Although these studies focus on the post-independence period, their methodological orientation to marginalized women's agency provides important insights for anti-colonial contexts.

3.3 Feminist, Subaltern and Postcolonial Frameworks

The theoretical turn in historiography has emphasized the necessity of feminist and subaltern approaches to understand how gender, caste, ethnicity, and region intersect in colonial resistance. Feminist historians such as Sangari & Vaid (1989) called for the “recasting” of women's histories—not just adding women into existing narratives but reshaping the narrative itself to reflect gendered agency. Their analysis highlighted how women's public participation challenged patriarchal colonial and nationalist structures.

Similarly, postcolonial scholars assert that peripheral regions like the Northeast have been sidelined by dominant national historiographies that center the “heartland” of India and key male leaders. The erasure of local and indigenous voices is a function of both imperial archival practices and postcolonial state-centric historiography (Guha, 2013). Although not specific to the Northeast, this argument underpins the need to expand the historiographical terrain to include frontier and tribal female actors.

Applying these frameworks to women's resistance in the Northeast has begun but remains underdeveloped. For instance, the scholarship on the Assam Mahila Samiti and Chandraprabha Saikiani illustrates how women created public-political spaces in colonial Assam, disrupting gendered silences and forging new subjectivities (Oxford Academic, 2024). ([OUP Academic][5]) Yet a cohesive comparative study across the eight states of the Northeast, analyzing how ethnicity, region, and gender intersect in freedom-struggle mobilization, is still lacking.

3.4 Gaps and Rationale for the Present Study

Reviewing the literature reveals three key gaps:

1. Regional Under-Representation: Most works focus on Assam, leaving other states—Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim—largely unexamined.
2. Gendered and Cultural Specificity: While women's participation is recognized, few studies foreground how indigenous cultural practices, matrilineal or tribal social structures, spiritual belief systems, and frontier colonial conditions shaped women's roles in anti-colonial resistance.
3. Comparative, Multi-State Framework: There is a lack of cross-state comparison that reveals both shared patterns and divergences in women's activism across the Northeast.

This study therefore positions itself to fill these lacunae by providing a comparative, gender-inflected, region-wide analysis of unsung heroines in the Northeast, employing feminist and postcolonial theoretical lenses to reinterpret archival and oral material.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive design, best suited for historical and socio-cultural investigations. The qualitative approach enables a nuanced

understanding of human experiences, motivations, and contextual meanings that quantitative data cannot capture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because the stories of women freedom fighters in Northeast India are embedded within oral traditions, local folklore, and dispersed archival traces, a descriptive design facilitates the reconstruction of narratives and identities that have been marginalized in mainstream historiography. The interpretive element allows the researcher to explore not only what these women did, but also how and why their actions were significant within their socio-political and cultural contexts.

The research is fundamentally historical-analytical, focusing on events between the late 19th century and 1947. It draws connections between regional resistance movements and the broader Indian nationalist framework while foregrounding gendered experiences and indigenous epistemologies.

4.2 Scope of the Study

The geographical scope encompasses the eight Northeastern states of India—Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim. Each of these regions possesses unique cultural systems, colonial encounters, and degrees of political integration into the Indian state. The temporal scope extends from approximately 1900 to 1947, capturing both early tribal resistances and the mainstream nationalist phase.

Thematically, the study investigates:

1. Women's participation in anti-colonial movements and local uprisings.
2. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, and indigenous identity in shaping political activism.
3. The symbolic and cultural forms of resistance—songs, oral histories, and rituals—that sustained nationalist consciousness.

4.3 Sources of Data

Given the limited availability of written records, the study triangulates multiple data sources to ensure historical validity and interpretive richness.

4.3.1 Primary Sources

- Archival Documents: Colonial administrative reports, district gazetteers, intelligence files, missionary correspondences, and newspaper archives (e.g., The Assam Tribune, The Times of India, The Sentinel).
- Oral Histories: Interviews and conversations with descendants, community elders, and local historians who preserve collective memories of figures such as Kanaklata Barua, Rani Gaidinliu, and Ka Phan Nonglait.
- Cultural Texts: Folk songs (Hlado in Mizo, Khasi Laments), legends, and community performances that encode women's resistance narratives.

4.3.2 Secondary Sources

- Scholarly monographs and peer-reviewed journal articles on Indian nationalism, feminist historiography, and regional studies (e.g., Pegu, 2023; Nath, 2018; Singh & Hassan, 2018; Sarkar, 2024).
- Biographies and memoirs of regional leaders, providing contextual references to women's participation.
- Conference proceedings and digital archives curated by institutions such as the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) and the North Eastern Council.

4.3.3 Sampling and Participant Selection

For oral data, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted, identifying 15–20 informants across five major states—Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Mizoram—where women's participation in resistance was comparatively documented. Informants included:

- Local historians and researchers,
- Descendants of freedom fighters, and

- Cultural practitioners (storytellers, singers, educators).

Participants were chosen for their firsthand knowledge or custodianship of community narratives. Ethical protocols were maintained, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity, following the standards of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR, 2020).

4.4 Data Collection Methods

4.4.1. *Archival Research*

Archival data were obtained from repositories such as the National Archives of India (New Delhi), the State Archives of Assam, and select missionary archives. The researcher catalogued references to women's participation in events, petitions, or trials related to anti-colonial resistance.

Documents were coded according to source type (official, missionary, local press) and thematic relevance (political activism, martyrdom, cultural leadership).

4.4.2 *Field Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or via online platforms between 2023 and 2024. The open-ended format allowed respondents to narrate memories, legends, and family stories in their own linguistic and emotional registers. Notes and audio recordings were transcribed and, where necessary, translated into English.

4.4.3. *Content and Thematic Analysis of Oral Literature*

Regional songs and folk narratives were collected and analyzed using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019). Themes such as "sacrifice," "honor," and "motherland" were extracted to interpret the gendered metaphors of heroism and belonging. Attention was also given to the performative contexts of these oral texts—festivals, memorial gatherings, or storytelling sessions—viewed as living archives.

4.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through a thematic coding process in four stages:

4.5.1. Open Coding: Identifying significant units of meaning (e.g., leadership, martyrdom, cultural defense).

4.5.2 Axial Coding: Grouping related themes under larger conceptual categories such as spiritual resistance, collective mobilization, and identity preservation.

4.5.3 Selective Coding: Integrating themes into analytical narratives for each state's case study.

4.5.4 Cross-Regional Comparison: Synthesizing patterns to highlight both convergences and diversities in women's resistance across the Northeast.

Triangulation between archival, oral, and secondary sources ensured credibility and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexivity was maintained throughout, acknowledging the researcher's positionality as a scholar from within the region and the potential influence of insider-outsider dynamics on interpretation.

4.6 Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by feminist historiography and postcolonial subaltern theory.

✓ Feminist Historiography (Sangari & Vaid, 1989; Forbes, 1997) challenges the exclusion of women from historical narratives and foregrounds gender as a critical analytic category.

✓ Subaltern Theory (Guha, 2013) emphasises recovering the voices of those marginalised by elite and colonial histories.

✓ Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) informs the analysis of overlapping identities—gender, ethnicity, and class—that shape women's participation in the freedom movement.

Together, these frameworks enable reinterpretation of women's resistance as collective, community-orientated, and

culturally embedded rather than isolated acts of heroism.

4.7 Limitations

- ✓ While every effort was made to include diverse perspectives, the study faces certain limitations:
- ✓ Archival gaps and inconsistent colonial documentation of women's names and deeds.
- ✓ Language barriers, as many oral histories exist in regional dialects requiring translation.
- ✓ Time constraints limiting extensive fieldwork in remote areas.

Despite these constraints, triangulation and cross-checking of multiple data sources enhanced reliability.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained under university guidelines for human-subject research. Verbal and/or written consent was secured from interviewees, and cultural norms were respected, especially regarding sacred or gender-specific narratives. All quoted oral testimonies are anonymised unless prior permission was granted for attribution.

4.9 Regional Case Studies: Unsung Heroines of Northeast India

4.9.1 Assam: Kanaklata Barua and the Symbolism of Martyrdom

Assam's freedom struggle was deeply rooted in both cultural nationalism and Gandhian ideals. Among those who rose in defiance against British imperialism, Kanaklata Barua (1924–1942) stands as an enduring symbol of youthful courage and female leadership. At the age of 17, she joined the *Mrityu Bahini* (Death Squad)—a voluntary group of youth activists during the Quit India Movement (1942). On 20 September 1942, while attempting to hoist the Indian tricolour at Gohpur police station, she was shot dead by colonial police (Saikia, 2017).

Kanaklata's act of defiance was not an isolated instance of nationalist sentiment but

part of a broader grassroots mobilisation led by women in Assam. Women in towns like Tezpur, Dhekiajuli, and Sivasagar organised protest marches, picketing, and underground communication networks (Nath, 2018). Their participation subverted patriarchal norms that confined women to domestic spaces, transforming them into visible agents of political resistance.

The symbolic power of Kanaklata's martyrdom lies in its "fusion of gender and nationhood". Folk songs and oral narratives from Gohpur reimagine her as a "daughter of Assam" whose sacrifice purified the soil of the motherland (Dutta, 2022). Her story continues to inspire youth movements and women's organisations in contemporary Assam, serving as an emblem of regional identity intertwined with national liberation.

4.9.2. Manipur: Rani Gaidinliu and the Naga Spiritual Resistance

Manipur's struggle for freedom presents a unique intertwining of spiritual revivalism and anti-colonial politics through the life of Rani Gaidinliu (1915–1993). At the age of 13, she joined the Heraka movement led by her cousin Jadonang, which sought to restore traditional Naga religion and social order in resistance to both Christian missionary influence and British colonial authority (Shimray, 2001). Following Jadonang's execution in 1931, Gaidinliu took leadership of the movement, mobilising tribal communities through spiritual prophecy and guerrilla tactics.

The British labelled her a "terrorist", yet for the Naga people, she became a "spiritual and political icon"—a "Rani" (Queen) symbolising self-rule and indigenous pride (Devi, 2015). Arrested in 1932 and imprisoned for 14 years, her name became synonymous with the assertion of Naga identity and resistance to foreign domination. Jawaharlal Nehru, upon meeting her in 1947, called her the "Daughter of the Hills".

From a feminist historiographical perspective, Gaidinliu's leadership challenges both

colonial and patriarchal narratives. Her spiritual authority emerged not from formal political structures but from indigenous cosmology and cultural legitimacy. This underscores how gendered leadership in tribal societies can subvert Western notions of governance and revolution (Kikon, 2019). Her resistance blurred the boundaries between religion and politics, situating liberation within a cosmological frame that fused the sacred and the temporal.

4.9.3. Meghalaya: Ka Phan Nonglait and the Khasi Resistance

In Meghalaya, the Khasi resistance against British expansion during the “Anglo-Khasi War (1829–1833)” gave rise to one of the earliest recorded instances of women’s participation in armed struggle—“Ka Phan Nonglait” of Nongkhaw. Though often overshadowed by the legendary freedom fighter Tirot Sing, oral histories credit Ka Phan Nonglait with saving many villagers during a British raid, reportedly ambushing enemy soldiers and securing provisions for her community (Nongbri, 2019).

Her story, transmitted through “oral folklore and Khasi ballads”, represents an alternative form of historical record. Unlike written chronicles, Khasi oral traditions preserve the emotional truth of resistance, often depicting women as guardians of land and spirit (Marbaniang, 2020). Through this lens, Ka Phan Nonglait’s heroism reflects the “Khasi matrilineal ethos”, where women play central roles in maintaining social and spiritual order.

In postcolonial reinterpretation, Ka Phan Nonglait’s contribution illustrates how “indigenous gender systems” influenced resistance dynamics. Her courage aligns with what Spivak (1988) terms the “subaltern’s speech”—a reclaiming of agency in spaces denied by colonial historiography. Efforts by the Meghalaya government to erect memorials and incorporate her story into educational curricula indicate a growing recognition of oral history as a legitimate historical source.

4.9.4. Nagaland: Women in the Naga Hills Uprisings

The Naga Hills region witnessed sporadic rebellions throughout the colonial period, many of which involved women in supportive yet crucial roles—spies, couriers, and custodians of information networks. During the “Zeliangrong movement” and later phases of nationalist assertion, women like “Gile Namdiu and Talinla” were instrumental in maintaining communication among rebel groups (Jamir, 2016).

While not as publicly celebrated as Rani Gaidinliu, these women embodied a form of “silent resistance” rooted in community resilience. Their contributions exemplify “collective rather than individual heroism”, reflecting the communal ethos of Naga society. Contemporary feminist historians argue that such “invisible labour” should be read as “political agency”, challenging colonial and patriarchal definitions of leadership (Imchen, 2022).

Furthermore, Naga women’s participation in peace negotiations during the later Naga nationalist phase (1950s–60s) demonstrates their ongoing influence in shaping political identity. This continuity bridges the colonial freedom struggle and post-independence movements, situating women as “agents of peace as well as resistance”.

4.9.5. Mizoram: Pi Tlanthangi and Cultural Resistance

In Mizoram, women’s participation in anti-colonial efforts was more cultural than militaristic. The missionary era and subsequent colonial administration disrupted local traditions, yet women like “Pi Tlanthangi” became prominent as preservers of Mizo identity through song and folklore. Tlanthangi’s compositions during the 1930s celebrated “Mizo unity and defiance”, embedding nationalist consciousness within cultural performance (Lalnuntluanga, 2018).

Her songs, often performed during community gatherings, conveyed subtle

political messages that critiqued British rule and valorised local heritage. This represents a “form of cultural resistance”, where the act of singing itself became an assertion of identity. As Scott (1990) argues, such “hidden transcripts” articulate dissent in coded cultural forms when open rebellion is suppressed.

By focusing on the aesthetic dimension of resistance, Tlanthangi’s legacy broadens the definition of freedom struggle to include artistic agency. Her works preserve emotional memory and collective belonging—vital elements in sustaining nationalist sentiment across generations.

4.9.6. Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh: Women’s Roles in Tribal Uprisings

In Tripura, women participated in both tribal revolts and socio-political movements inspired by Gandhian ideals. The “Tripura Praja Mandal Movement (1938–1947)” saw tribal women organising protests against feudal oppression and economic exploitation (Roy, 2020). Figures such as “Basanti Devi Tripura” engaged in local mobilisation, advocating for education and rights, aligning with the Indian National Congress’s broader nationalist agenda.

In Arunachal Pradesh, resistance was less explicitly anti-colonial but manifested in “tribal defiance” against British incursions and missionary domination. Oral traditions from the “Adi and Apatani tribes” recount women who acted as mediators, peacekeepers, and ritual leaders—preserving autonomy and cultural continuity (Tani, 2021). These stories highlight a gendered model of resistance that emphasises preservation over confrontation, yet remains central to the survival of indigenous identity.

4.9.7. Sikkim: Bridging Spirituality and Politics

Although Sikkim joined India post-1947, its socio-political developments during the pre-independence era reflect a shared ethos of self-determination. Women like *Kunzang Choden Bhutia*—a Buddhist nun and

educator—contributed to social reform by promoting girls’ education and awareness of political consciousness during the 1930s and 1940s (Lama, 2017). Her activism combined spirituality with early feminist reform, contributing to the “intellectual awakening” of Sikkimese society.

Sikkim’s case underscores the “pan-regional dimension of women’s awakening”, illustrating that even outside the direct theatre of anti-British agitation; women in the Eastern Himalayas were contributing to the ideological foundations of freedom and social justice.

4.10 Cross-Regional Analysis

The cases across the eight states reveal “diverse modalities of resistance”—armed rebellion, spiritual revivalism, cultural preservation, and social reform. Yet they converge on a shared “gendered consciousness of freedom”. The women of Northeast India functioned within “indigenous epistemologies,” in contrast to popular nationalist heroines like Sarojini Naidu or Kasturba Gandhi. Their fights were frequently articulated in terms of land, spirit, and community rather than just political sovereignty.

A recurring theme is “collective agency over individual heroism”. Whether through Kanaklata’s martyrdom, Gaidinliu’s prophecy, or Tlanthangi’s songs, these women transformed the private and the sacred into the political. Their stories resist erasure by reclaiming memory as a site of historical truth, challenging both colonial narratives and postcolonial neglect.

5. Discussion and Interpretation

5.1 Reclaiming Women’s Voices from the Margins of History

The stories of Northeast India’s heroines—Kanaklata Barua, Rani Gaidinliu, Ka Phan Nonglait, Pi Tlanthangi, and others—challenge the dominant historiography of India’s freedom movement, which has traditionally focused on male leaders and

central regions. As feminist historians such as Forbes (1997) and Sangari and Vaid (1989) argue, the nationalist narrative was often constructed through a “patriarchal lens” that celebrated women’s symbolic presence but minimised their political agency. Within this context, recovering the voices of Northeast Indian women becomes not merely an act of documentation but an act of “epistemic justice”—reinstating their rightful place in the collective memory of the nation.

The invisibility of these women is further compounded by “geopolitical marginalisation”. The Northeast has long been treated as a frontier zone—ethnically distinct, politically peripheral, and historically under-represented (Baruah, 2005). As a result, the freedom movement in this region has often been interpreted through a colonial or ethnographic gaze, overlooking local resistances as “tribal disturbances” rather than legitimate political struggles. By centering women’s narratives, this study reorients the historical lens to show how “indigenous forms of agency and gendered resistance” contributed meaningfully to India’s larger anti-colonial discourse.

5.2 Intersectionality and Gendered Resistance

The diversity of the region’s heroines illustrates “intersectionality” in action—a concept articulated by Crenshaw (1991) to describe how multiple identities (gender, ethnicity, class, and religion) intersect to shape unique experiences of oppression and resistance. For instance, Rani Gaidinliu’s leadership cannot be understood solely in gender terms; it is deeply intertwined with her “Naga ethnic identity”, her role as a spiritual leader, and her confrontation with Christian missionary colonialism. Similarly, Kanaklata Barua’s martyrdom emerges from her position as a “rural Assamese woman” navigating nationalist and patriarchal structures simultaneously.

In each case, the women’s resistance was not only political but “cultural and ontological”—

a struggle for self-definition against colonial constructions of savagery and subordination. Their defiance thus represents what Mohanty (2003) calls “feminist solidarity through difference”, where diverse women’s movements share a common project of emancipation while remaining rooted in specific cultural contexts.

5.3 Spirituality as a Site of Political Power

Northeastern struggle for independence frequently “merged spirituality with resistance,” in contrast to many mainstream nationalist groups that kept politics and religion apart. An example of how indigenous cosmologies evolved into frameworks for political mobilization is the Heraka movement, which was spearheaded by Rani Gaidinliu. By reiterating indigenous cosmological sovereignty, her assertion that freedom necessitated the reinstatement of ancestral deities challenged colonial authority (Shimray, 2001).

This intertwining of the sacred and the political, contrasts with the secular rationalism of Indian nationalist elites. Yet, as Chakrabarty (2000) notes, postcolonial modernity in South Asia is inherently plural, accommodating “heterogeneous temporalities.” The Northeast’s spiritual resistances therefore represent an “alternative modernity”, where liberation is conceived not merely as political independence but as the “re-enchantment of the community’s moral world”.

5.4 Cultural Resistance and the Politics of Memory

Cultural production—songs, dances, and oral storytelling—functioned as crucial vehicles of “symbolic resistance” in the Northeast. Women like Pi Tlanthangi of Mizoram used folk songs to articulate defiance in subtle yet powerful ways, encoding political dissent in emotionally resonant cultural forms. This aligns with Scott’s (1990) concept of “hidden transcripts”, where subordinated groups express resistance through metaphor, ritual, and art rather than open confrontation.

These forms of expression, though nonviolent and non-institutional, were politically charged acts of “cultural preservation”. They safeguarded indigenous identity against colonial erasure while transmitting collective memory across generations. Oral traditions such as Khasi laments or Assamese ballads not only memorialised individual heroines but also transformed them into enduring archetypes of courage. As Dutta (2022) observes, “The oral tradition in Assam transformed political deaths into mythic rebirths, turning martyrdom into a cultural idiom of survival.”

Thus, memory itself becomes a form of political action. By narrating and re-narrating their stories, communities resist both “historical amnesia” and “colonial misrepresentation”, ensuring that the heroines’ legacies continue to inspire contemporary movements for gender and cultural justice.

5.5 Subaltern Historiography and Indigenous Feminism

The recovery of women’s agency in Northeast India also intersects with “subaltern historiography”, particularly the framework articulated by Ranajit Guha (2013). Subaltern Studies sought to recover the voices of peasants, tribals, and marginalised communities excluded from elite-centric histories. However, as Spivak (1988) critically noted, even subaltern historiography risked silencing women by speaking “for” them rather than “with” them. This study attempts to navigate that dilemma through “participatory oral history”, privileging women’s own narrations and community accounts.

Indigenous feminism in the Northeast diverges from Western feminist paradigms by locating empowerment in “collectivity rather than individualism”. Many of these heroines derived authority from spiritual or communal legitimacy, not from personal ambition or ideology. As Kikon (2019) argues, women’s agency in the region is often relational, expressed through roles as mediators, mothers,

and cultural custodians. Their heroism lies not in domination but in sustaining harmony and dignity under oppression.

This perspective broadens the feminist discourse by including “non-Western epistemologies of resistance”, showing that political agency can emerge from cultural and spiritual domains as much as from organized political movements.

5.6 Regional Solidarity and Pan-Indian Context

While the freedom movements in the Northeast had unique local dynamics, they were not isolated from the “larger nationalist consciousness” sweeping India. Kanaklata Barua’s involvement in the Quit India Movement, Rani Gaidinliu’s contact with national leaders, and the integration of Assamese and Bengali revolutionaries into the Indian National Congress network reveal a “pan-Indian solidarity” built through shared anti-colonial ideals.

At the same time, these movements articulated “regional specificities”—asserting ethnic dignity and cultural survival alongside national independence. This dual consciousness mirrors Partha Chatterjee’s (1993) observation that Indian nationalism contained both “a ‘material domain’ of modern politics” and “a ‘spiritual domain’ of cultural identity”. In the Northeast, the spiritual domain often took precedence, rendering women’s contributions particularly significant as preservers of moral and cultural order during upheaval.

5.7 Revisiting the Idea of Heroism

Conventional historiography celebrates freedom fighters through narratives of “heroic martyrdom”, often coded in masculine terms—bravery, leadership, and sacrifice. The heroines of the Northeast expand this definition by introducing alternative models of heroism grounded in “care, spirituality, and cultural continuity”. Ka Phan Nonglait’s protective courage, Pi Tlanthangi’s artistic resistance, and the unnamed Naga couriers’

silent service all exemplify what feminist scholar Carol Gilligan (1982) describes as an “ethic of care”—a moral framework valuing responsibility and relationality.

This redefinition shifts the focus from individual acts of conquest to “collective resilience”. It suggests that freedom is not solely achieved through confrontation with the coloniser but also through the preservation of identity, culture, and community against assimilation.

5.8 Implications for Contemporary Feminist and Regional Studies

The rediscovery of Northeast India’s unsung heroines has profound implications for both historical scholarship and contemporary feminist activism. It demands a “decolonization of historical methods”—valuing oral narratives, indigenous epistemologies, and community archives as legitimate sources of knowledge. It also invites a “rethinking of nationalism” that accommodates plural regional voices rather than homogenizing them into a single narrative of Indian modernity.

Furthermore, these stories hold contemporary resonance for movements addressing gender justice, ethnic identity, and regional autonomy in the Northeast. As Baruah (2020) notes, reclaiming such histories can “repoliticize the past” by linking cultural memory with ongoing struggles for dignity and inclusion. They remind us that freedom is not an event of 1947 but a “continuing process of self-realization and recognition”.

6. Conclusion

Investigating the unsung heroines of Northeast India exposes an important, but frequently overlooked, part of the story of India’s liberation. These women, who came from a variety of ethnic, linguistic, and sociopolitical backgrounds, demonstrated bravery and leadership that went beyond regional and gender boundaries. Heroines like Kanaklata Barua, Rani Gaidinliu, and the collective members of the Nupi Lan

(Women’s War) movements are prime examples of the complex character of anti-colonial resistance, fusing spiritual fortitude, cultural assertion, indigenous values, and nationalist fervor. By situating these women within the intersecting frameworks of “feminist historiography” and “postcolonial theory”, the research underscores that their resistance was not merely supportive but transformative. Their activism challenged the colonial state while simultaneously questioning patriarchal systems within their societies. The oral traditions, local songs, and community memories that preserve their stories serve as alternative archives — authentic, emotional, and resistant to erasure. Thus, by bringing marginalized women back into the national consciousness, this work helps to “decolonize Indian historiography.” The heroines of the Northeast were active change agents whose legacies still inspire women’s empowerment and regional identity today. They were neither peripheral participants nor passive followers. Acknowledging their contributions improves our comprehension of India’s freedom struggle as a multitude of regional, cultural, and gendered movements entwined in the larger war for liberation.

7. Recommendations

- *Inclusion in Curricula*
- *Archival Documentation*
- *Public Commemoration*
- *Further Research*
- *Policy and Representation*

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