



Women and Freedom Struggle in North East India

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Abstract

Women have been essential to the liberation struggle in North East India, having taken on a variety of crucial roles in a number of movements and times of resistance against colonial control, as well as in the struggles that followed to autonomy and self-determination. Women have shown incredible determination and perseverance in opposing repressive systems, from active involvement in anti-colonial movements to leading armed uprisings. Beyond overt conflict, women's resistance to assimilation and their rights in the face of cultural erasure have helped to preserve indigenous culture, language, and identity. They actively took part in civil disobedience and non-cooperation actions, boycotting colonial establishments and raising awareness. While some women, like Rani Gaidinliu, organized protests and worked in the background to support the freedom cause, others led violent resistance. Their fight challenged not only British rule but also sometimes patriarchal norms within their societies. The paper explores the various ways that women contributed to the liberation movement in North East India, emphasizing their agency, leadership, and lasting influence on the socio-political environment of the area.

Keyword : Struggle, Autonomy, Anti-colonial, Identity, Explore.

Introduction

North East India's history is marked by a diverse range of customs, civilizations, and a distinct liberation movement. The region has experienced the incredible participation of women in its freedom movement, amidst its gorgeous landscapes and different nationalities. Eight states make up North East India; each has a distinct sociocultural environment, yet they are all bound together by a shared

desire for dignity, autonomy, and identity. Women in this region have been involved in many different aspects of the struggle for liberation, acting as agents of empowerment, change, and resilience.

North East India's struggle for independence has been influenced by a complex web of political, social, and historical forces. Women have led resistance movements from the colonial era to the present, opposing repressive systems and fighting for the rights of their communities. Their contributions, which are frequently disregarded in popular accounts, have had a significant impact on the region's path toward empowerment and self-determination.

Through diverse types of activity, disobedience, and organization, women in North East India played key roles in the resistance against colonial rule. Their contributions were varied and complex, including more covert means of resistance as well as overt acts of insurrection. Their perseverance and fortitude have had a lasting impression on the history of the area, from leading campaigns against colonial rule to defending indigenous rights and cultural preservation. In North East India, women participated in cultural forms of anti-colonial struggle. In order to claim their identity and oppose the British government's forced cultural assimilation, they maintained and safeguarded their own traditions, dialects, and customs. In spite of colonial pressures, women preserved their cultural traditions and resilience by engaging in activities like weaving, storytelling, and following customs.

Alongside men, women took an active part in a number of anti-colonial campaigns and uprisings. They participated in marches, protests, and demonstrations to voice their opposition to the abuses and injustices of colonialism. These movements involved women from a variety of ethnic communities, including the Nagas, Manipuris, Assamese, and Mizos. In uprisings against colonial authority, women frequently assumed leadership positions. The Rani of Jhansi, who commanded her army against the British during the Indian Rebellion of 1857, is one famous example. In a similar vein, prominent leaders from the North East such as Rani Gaidinliu of the Naga tribe rose to prominence and led armed rebellion against British rule in the early 20th century.

Motivated by leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, they engaged in processions and protests, boycotted British products, and picketed stores that sold foreign goods. Women were organized by groups such as the Assam Mahila Samiti in Assam and its counterparts in other states, who produced indigenous textile (khadi) to raise awareness and encourage a sense of self-reliance. A number of women became well-known for spearheading armed opposition to British control. Manipur's bravery icon Rani Gaidinliu, along by her teacher Haipou Jadonang, contested British rule over their region. The "Iron Lady" of Manipur, Irom Sharmila Chanu, also embarked on a protracted hunger strike in opposition to the contentious Armed personnel (Special Powers) Act, which gave security personnel extensive authority.

A number of women in Northeast India realized the value of education as a means of achieving political and social change and resisting colonialism. They founded educational institutes and schools to educate young females and provide them with the information and abilities to oppose colonial hegemony. Additionally, at the municipal, regional, and federal levels, women have fought for the inclusion and defense of cultural rights in laws and policies. They have advocated for the adoption of laws to protect indigenous knowledge, holy sites, and cultural manifestations. They have also increased public awareness of the value of cultural heritage.

All things considered, women in North East India made a substantial contribution to the battle against colonial rule by way of their political movement support, activism, leadership, and preservation of culture. Their contributions were crucial to the region's larger fight for independence and self-determination.

Literature Review

Cultural variety, resistance to foreign dominance, and intricate interactions amongst sociopolitical forces have all shaped the history of North East India. In this regard, academics, historians, and activists have all become more interested in the contribution that women made to the liberation struggle in the region. By analyzing the diverse ways in which women have contributed to North East India's struggle for autonomy, identity, and emancipation, this literature review seeks to present a thorough overview of the body of knowledge on the subject.

It is necessary to comprehend the historical background of North East India in order to investigate the role played by women in the independence movement. The region's path towards independence has been shaped by colonial encounters, indigenous resistance, and socio-cultural transformations, as documented by Sanjoy Hazarika in "Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast" (1995). The text emphasizes the agency of women in larger movements for sovereignty and self-governance.

Through a variety of modes of activity and resistance, women in North East India played crucial roles in the struggle for sovereignty and self-governance against British colonial control. They took an active involvement in armed uprisings, with well-known individuals such as Naga tribe member Rani Gaidinliu spearheading rebel movements against British rule (Lavania, 2017). In order to demand autonomy and establish their rights, women also organized marches, demonstrations, and strikes. This helped to mobilize communities and amplify their demands for independence. In addition, women were prominent in the campaigns of civil disobedience, boycotting British products and using nonviolent resistance to overthrow colonial rule. Additionally, through diplomatic discussions and advocacy work, they supported traditional forms of government, revitalized indigenous political institutions, and promoted indigenous rights.

For a variety of causes, women's contributions to the North Eastern freedom struggle were frequently underreported in earlier histories. First of all, women's engagement in public spheres was restricted by patriarchal standards of the era, which obscured their efforts. Second, it is challenging to convey a single story in the region due to the ethnic diversity, which could obscure the contributions of particular populations. Lastly, it's possible that the emphasis on well-known national individuals obscured the regional conflict and the critical role that women played in it. Due to the combination of these reasons, there is a historical information gap about the various ways that women from the Northeast actively participated in the struggle for independence. However, scholars later highlighted the need to revisit the narrative (Devi, G., 2022). The shift in the

focus clearly reflected on the immense contributions by women in the freedom struggle.

Women from North East India made major contributions to the larger Indian independence movement by participating in non-cooperation and civil disobedience campaigns against British colonial control. Women in the area conducted marches, protests, and acts of civil disobedience to oppose colonial oppression and establish their rights, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's ideas of peaceful resistance (Gupta, R. 2019). In order to demand self-governance and sovereignty, they boycotted British products, defied unfair laws, and took part in nonviolent protests.

Engaging in armed resistance movements against colonial rule and the ensuing governmental repression is a noteworthy facet of women's participation in North East India's freedom struggle. The roles of women as fighters, leaders, and organizers in movements like the Naga insurgency have been studied by academics like Temsula Ao and Monisha Behal (George, L, 2024). These studies highlight the difficulties women encounter in militarized environments and highlight their contributions to the larger fight for women's rights.

The research work of Amin (2023) points out there are many inspirational women from North East India who broke with society to support the independence movement. In most publications, the Manipur native Rani Gaidinliu is mentioned frequently. Her bravery inspired generations as she led guerilla battle against British rule alongside Haipou Jadonang. One notable women's group from Assam is the Assam Mahila Samiti, which engaged in picketing, boycotts, and cultural performances to raise awareness (Haokip, 2022). In a same vein, individuals such as modern activist Irom Sharmila Chanu, who gained recognition for her hunger strike against the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), serve as examples of the continuous fight for regional autonomy. These are only a few of instances that demonstrate the various ways women from the region played crucial roles in the fight for independence.

Women's involvement in the freedom struggle in Northeast India was distinct from that of other regions of the country in a few significant respects. First off, in

contrast to more patriarchal systems found elsewhere, the strong matrilineal societies in the area—especially in Meghalaya and Nagaland—offered women a higher level of social and economic independence. They were probably encouraged to play more active roles in the conflict by their current degree of agency. Second, armed resistance to British advance was a common feature of the fighting in the Northeast (Singh, 2015). Lastly, the Northeast saw a lot of overlap between the battles for tribal identity and self-determination and freedom. Women added another dimension to the struggle for independence by actively participating in the preservation of cultural traditions and opposing assimilation programs (swami, 2021).

Fighting against cultural appropriation was a key component of the women's freedom struggle in North East India. The vast ethnic diversity of the area was frequently ignored in colonial attempts to impose a homogenized Indian identity. Women perceived this as an assault on their basic identity because they were instrumental in maintaining cultural practices like as singing, weaving, and folklore. Their involvement in the liberation movement turned into a means of defending these customs and making sure their cultural legacy wasn't taken advantage of or lost. Women like those performing in the Assam Mahila Samiti concerts fought against colonial control and affirmed their right to self-determination and cultural expression by actively promoting and upholding their distinctive customs. This opposition to cultural appropriation developed into a potent weapon for women in the North East to fight for freedom on their own terms (Dash, 2021).

Prominent leaders seem to have differing opinions about women's involvement in the freedom movement in North East India. Both restrictions and evidence of support are present. Positively, figures like Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose promoted women's participation aggressively. Acknowledging their capacity as a formidable force, he incorporated them into military training initiatives and expressed gratitude for their services during speeches. Leaders from the area, such as Manipur's I.M. Harilal Singh, recognized the vital role that women played in the resistance fight. He aggressively pursued their involvement in boycotts and open-air protests.

There were restrictions, though. Even within the freedom struggle, patriarchal conventions of the era might limit women's participation to more traditional roles (Kumar, G.). A concentration on nonviolent protests may have marginalized women like Rani Gaidinliu, who were essential to guerilla warfare techniques. Furthermore, the special challenges and accomplishments of women from various ethnic backgrounds in the North East may have been obscured by the focus on a single national narrative. The necessity for more study to fully tell these women's tales is highlighted by the movement's lack of acknowledgment within itself.

Throughout the freedom struggle, women in North East India disobeyed social norms by taking part in a variety of revolutionary activities. The tradition led by Rani Gaidinliu, Haipou Jadonang, and Assam Mahila Samiti mentioned earlier extended to other regions. These areas also have had a history of using force to resist. Women in Mizoram, for example, demonstrated their steadfast dedication to freedom struggle by actively taking part in raids and ambushes against British forces. Beyond armed struggle, women played a critical role in social mobilization movements. Women in Tripura formed their own associations to raise awareness about the freedom struggle and mobilize support for boycotts and protests. These movements not only challenged British economic control but also demonstrated the collective strength and organizational capacity of women in the region (Borah, 2022).

In their struggle for independence, the women of North East India encountered particular difficulties that went beyond the constraints experienced by women in other regions of the nation. The intricate social structure of the area was the first obstacle. In certain regions, such as Meghalaya and Nagaland, women have more social and economic autonomy, but in other places, patriarchal norms limit their movement and involvement in public life. This required them to push boundaries and negotiate social norms in order to aid in the struggle.

There were unique difficulties because of the nature of the North East's freedom movement. Since armed resistance against British encroachment was a common tactic in the conflict, women's involvement in the struggle for freedom in Northeast India questioned gender norms and may have negative social effects

(Bahadur, 2012). In addition, questions of tribal identity and self-determination were frequently entwined with the North East's freedom struggle. Women had an active role in upholding traditional customs and opposing assimilation programs, but they had to negotiate a challenging environment because their struggle intertwined with the larger movement for Indian independence.

Northeast Indian women's battle for self-determination had a profound effect on the freedom struggle and left a complicated legacy. By extending the movement's scope and encouraging a more inclusive national identity, it improved the movement on the one hand. By actively maintaining their distinct cultural traditions, women like those in the Assam Mahila Samiti contested the notion of a single, universally recognized "Indian" identity. A critical component was added to the broader battle when this fight for self-determination evolved into a plea for the recognition of regional diversity within a free India. Furthermore, they frequently worked to mobilize their communities, promote a feeling of group agency, and greatly increase public involvement in the cause.

Nonetheless, the national narrative faced obstacles as a result of the struggle for self-determination. Internal splits within the freedom struggle could occasionally result from the emphasis on regional aspirations and cultural preservation. It's possible that the national leadership neglected to adequately recognize or give priority to the unique requirements of Northeast Indian women in order to achieve a united front against the British. This can cause their contributions to be minimized or the idea that their struggle for independence diverted attention from the greater national objective. For the cause of freedom, striking a balance between these demands and maintaining unity while recognizing regional diversity proved imperative (Saxena, 2014).

In conclusion, the literature on women and the freedom struggle in North East India reflects a rich tapestry of experiences, perspectives, and challenges. From armed resistance to cultural resurgence, women have been central agents of change in the region's quest for autonomy and liberation. However, much remains to be done to address the systemic inequalities and injustices faced by women in North East India, emphasizing the need for continued research, advocacy, and solidarity efforts.

Conclusion

Women's contributions to North East India's freedom struggle are evidence of their tenacity, charisma, and unshakable dedication to the cause of emancipation and autonomy. Women have always been crucial change agents in the history of the area, whether they are involved in armed resistance activities or are active participants in civil disobedience initiatives at the grassroots level. Their efforts, which are sometimes disregarded in popular accounts, have had a significant impact on how North East India's sociopolitical environment has developed and how its different populations' goals have been advanced. In the continuous fight for self-governance and sovereignty, women have persevered in the face of many difficulties, establishing a lasting legacy of courage, unity, and empowerment. Upon considering their combined accomplishments, it is clear that the path to freedom in North East India is inseparable from the indomitable spirit and invaluable contributions of its women.

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