

Women Icons from North East India

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Abstract

Surrounded by the eastern Himalayan ranges, North East India comprises the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The region is distinguished by its uneven terrain, multiplicity of ethnic communities and a rich cultural heritage. There is a high concentration of tribal population in the States of Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, and also in some of the hilly districts of Manipur, Assam and Tripura. But due to its location and terrain, the region has for long remained isolated from the rest of the country. So, not much is known about the valour and achievements of women from the area, who have been the harbingers of social change. This article gives a glimpse of the contributions made by some of these women icons in various walks of life as varied as Freedom Struggle, sports and arts.

INTRODUCTION

With a variety of cuisine, crafts, languages, flora and fauna, North East India has a fascinating mosaic of culture. Rich in indigenous diversity, the region is home to many tribes, each with its unique beliefs, traditions and customs. Women in the region, like the entire India, are, primarily, conditioned to do household and

agrarian chores. But many have broken the patriarchal shackles and proven their mettle in a myriad of fields like Freedom Struggle, sports, arts, music, literature, journalism, etc.

WOMEN IN THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT

The role and contribution of women in India's Freedom Struggle has been remarkable. Women from Manipur, too,

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have actively participated in scripting the history of the country. Their struggle against British colonisers dates back to the first decade of the twentieth century. *Nupi Lan*, meaning war led by women, is an important movement in the history of Manipur. Manipuri women waged two historic *Nupi Lans* in 1904 and 1939 against the British.



Figure 1: Manipuri women fought *Nupi Lans* against the British in 1904 and 1939.

The first *Nupi Lan* (1904) was a revolt against the British imperialists for enforcing *Lallup* (forced labour) on men in the State. Many women united to protest against the British atrocities and razed the bungalow of a British agent. They even set ablaze stalls at Khwairamband Bazar in Imphal, Manipur.

The second *Nupi Lan* was fought in the year 1939 at the time of the World War-II. Women waged this war against the indiscriminate export of rice from Manipur by Marwari traders, who enjoyed British patronage. This practice of rice export had led to a famine-like situation in Manipur even though it being the harvest season.

These *Nupi Lans* against the oppressive policies of the British colonisers are indicative of the leadership role played by women in the North East and also their ability to mobilise themselves socially.

The contribution of women activists in the Freedom Struggle does not end here. In 1942, many women in Assam, too, joined the Quit India Movement and laid down their lives. A special mention may be made of **Kanaklata**, a teenaged girl, who died in police firing while trying to hoist the National Flag at a police station in Gohpur.

Ima Keithel

Meaning women's market, *Ima Keithel* is located at the same place in Imphal, where the first *Nupi Lan* was fought. It is one of India's largest markets run and managed by women. Men are allowed here only as customers. The unique market consists of 3,000 *Imas* (mothers), running the stalls. It is divided into two sections. Vegetables, fruits, fish and grocery items are sold on one side of the road, while handloom and household items on the other.



Figure 2: *Ima Keithel* in Imphal, Manipur

Her undying spirit and patriotism became a source of inspiration for the people of Assam and the entire India. She went on to acquire the status of a 'legend' in the Assamese culture and many folk songs were composed in her honour.

'Rani' Gaidinliu of Manipur, born in 1915, who belonged to the Kabui Naga tribe, joined the movement at the age of 13 years. In 1932, she was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment. She was kept in different jails in Imphal, Shillong, Aizawl, etc., till India gained Independence.



Figure 3: A stamp issued in the memory of Rani Gaidinliu of Manipur

Jawaharlal Nehru, who became the first Prime Minister of India, met her first at the Tura Jail in Shillong in 1937. He was so impressed with her grit and valour that he called her the 'Daughter of the Hills' and bestowed her with the title of 'Rani' (queen). After being released from jail in 1947, Rani Gaidinliu spent the rest of her life

-serving the people. The Government of India recognised her as a 'freedom fighter' and awarded her with the Tamra Patra Freedom Fighter Award in 1972. Commemorative stamps worth ₹5 and ₹100 were issued in her honour in the year 1996, while the Government of India issued coins of the same denomination on her 100th birth anniversary in 2015. The Indian Coast Guard also commissioned a patrol vessel called 'Rani Gaidinliu' in her honour.

Chandraprava Saikiani, born in 1901, was a freedom fighter, social activist, writer and crusader of the feminist movement in Assam. She actively participated in the Non-cooperation Movement of 1920-21 and the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1932. At the age of 17 years, as a student leader, she vehemently spoke against the ill effects of opium and demanded a ban on its cultivation throughout the State. To give voice to several voiceless women, she set up the Asom Pradeshik Mahila Samiti at Dhubri in 1926. In 1948, Saikiani protested against temples for not allowing entry to women. She also raised her voice against child marriage, polygamy and old men marrying small age girls. The Government of India honoured her with the Padma Shri posthumously in 1972. The government also issued a commemorative stamp in her honour under the series titled 'Social Reformers' in the year 2002.



Figure 4: Olympian Mary Kom from Manipur

WOMEN IN SPORTS

Boxing was predominantly considered to be a male bastion prior to the entry of Olympian, Mangte Chungneijang Mary Kom, popularly known as **Mary Kom**, from Manipur. From being a poor tenant farmer's daughter to becoming an Olympian (winning the Bronze medal in 2012) and a six-time champion in the World Amateur Boxing Championship tournaments, her journey is an inspiration to many (especially, women) across the globe. She has received many awards like the Arjuna Award, Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award, Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan. She is the first amateur



Figure 5: Olympian Dipa Karmakar from Tripura

athlete to be awarded with the Padma Bhushan. At present, she is serving as a Member of Parliament in the Rajya Sabha.

Tripura's **Dipa Karmakar** is the first woman gymnast from India to qualify

for the Olympics. She bagged the fourth position in the Women's Vault finals at the Olympic Games held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2016. She, too, has received many awards like the Arjuna Award, Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award and Padma Shri.

N. Kunjarani Devi is a celebrated weightlifter from Manipur. She participated in the Olympics in 2004 and bagged the fourth position. As of now, she has participated in various weightlifting world championship tournaments and has made the country proud by winning many medals. She has also won three gold medals in the 2002 Commonwealth Games. She is the recipient of the Arjuna Award, Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award and Padma Shri.



Figure 6: Weightlifting champion N. Kunjarani Devi from Manipur

Tine Mena of Arunachal Pradesh is the second Indian to hoist the Tricolour on the peak of the Mount Everest, after Bachendri Pal. The Mount Everest is the highest peak in the world at a height of 8,848 metres. Undeterred by the strong gales and heavy snowfall, she scaled the Everest from its southern side.

She worked as a porter and tree cutter that earned her ₹1,500 a month, which she used to support her training. Even after receiving the news about her mother's demise during the expedition, Mena continued with her journey to the top.

EXERCISING THE POWER OF THE PEN

Indira Raisom Goswami, popularly known as Mamoni Baideo, wrote in Assamese. Goswami, a young widow, started her career as a school teacher in Assam, and went on to become a professor of Assamese at the Delhi University. She started writing at the age of 13 years. Her writings depict the miseries suffered by the downtrodden in society. Her novel, *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howda (The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker)*, revolves around the lives of three Brahmin widows at *Satra* (religious institutions in Assam). In *Chhinnamastar Manuh To (The Man from Chinnamasta)*, she wrote a critique on the tradition of animal sacrifice in temples. Goswami's another novel,



Figure 7: Litterateur Indira Raisom Goswami from Assam is a Jnanpith Award recipient.

Neelkanthi Braj (The Blue-necked God), depicts the apathetic attitude of the society towards widows. She has also written novels and short stories on riots, construction labourers, labour unions, labour strikes, etc., in the backdrop of Delhi. Her autobiography is titled *Adha Lekha Dastabej (The Unfinished Autobiography)*. She received the Sahitya Akademy Award for her novel, *Mamore Dhora Torowal (The Rusted Sword)*. She went on to win the country's highest literary award, the Jnanpith Award, for her contribution to literature, becoming the second Assamese writer to be, thus, honoured.

Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi was a revered writer, lyricist, sculptor and painter from Manipur. Devi was born in a royal family of Manipur in 1922. She has written many novels and short stories based on her experiences in the palace and lives of royals. Her collection of short stories titled *Nunggairakta Chandramukhi (Chrysanthemums among the Rocks)* established her in the world of

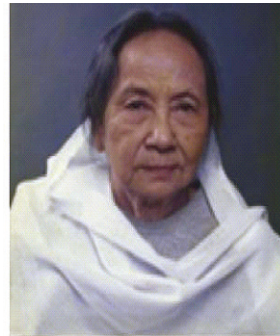


Figure 8: Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi, a celebrated writer and artist from Manipur

Manipuri literature. She received the Sahitya Akademi Award and Manipur's State Kala Akademy Award for her novel, *Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi (The Princess and the Political Agent)*, and the Padma Shri for her contribution in the field of art and literature. She also directed a ballet called *Sangai*, which is based on the endangered brow-antlered deer of Manipur, and also introduced *Thang-ta*, a Manipuri martial art form on stage. *Thang-ta* is now one of the recognised martial art forms in India. Devi was instrumental in establishing the Manipur Film Development Corporation, Manipur Polo Association, Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy and several other organisations for the promotion of arts, dance and music.

Mamang Dai is a poet, author and journalist from Arunachal Pradesh, who writes in English. A former member of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), she quit the civil services to pursue journalism and writing. She has written and published many books of poetry like *River Poems* (2004) and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* (2014). She has also written a book titled *Arunachal Pradesh — The Hidden Land*, which documents the culture and customs of the State, with a guide about the places to visit and colourful photographs. She has also written many novels based on the history of Arunachal Pradesh and short stories for children.

Patricia Mukhim from Meghalaya is one of the most celebrated journalists from the North East.

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Figure 9: Journalist Patricia Mukhim from Meghalaya is a Padma Shri recipient.

She is the *Editor* of *The Shillong Times*, Meghalaya's oldest and largest circulated English newspaper. She regularly contributes to newspapers like *The Telegraph*, *The Statesman*, *The Assam Tribune* and *Shillong Times*. A Padma Shri recipient, Mukhim started her career as a teacher and later switched to writing and journalism.

NURTURING MUSIC

Born in a conservative family of Nagaon Assam, **Begum Parveen Sultana** is a renowned classical vocalist. She has performed with her *guru* (teacher or mentor) and husband Ustad Dilshad Khan at several national and international events. She has sung in many Assamese and Hindi films as well. Sultana is the recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan, among others.

Laishram Mema Devi, considered the 'Nightingale of Manipur', has devoted her life to music. Her rendition in various genres of Indian classical music like *thumri*, *dadra*, *kajri*, *bhajan*, *ghazals*, film and folk

songs from several States of the country titled *Swaranjali* is popular. She has sung for Hindi, Assamese and Manipuri films as well.

CONCLUSION

Thus, these women devoted their entire life to bring in social change in their surroundings, despite facing personal hardships and challenges. Their lives and work is an inspiration to many. Sharing the stories of such successful

women, especially, at the primary stage will make students aware about their valuable contributions in a myriad of fields. It will also help strengthen interstate and inter-region bond. Hence, it is the responsibility of educators and policy makers at the National and State level to ensure that the young learners are made aware of India's rich diverse culture and eminent personalities in various fields from different parts of the country.

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