



Contemporary Relevance Of The Heraka Movement For Women-Led Development

¹Dr. Velentina Brahma, ²Dr. Abhishek Ranjan

¹Assistant Professor, ²Research Associate

¹Department of Zoology,

¹Zakir Husain Delhi College, Delhi, India

Abstract: The Heraka movement of the Zeliangrong Nagas (Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei communities of modern Assam, Manipur and Nagaland) provides valuable lessons into native folk leadership and social reformation practices of the community. The movement, which started off under Haipou Jadonang and was subsequently led by Rani Gaidinliu, focused on spiritual rejuvenation, culture and moral discipline based on the veneration of the supreme who is Tingwang. Although it was culturally linked to going against colonial domination and defending the native culture, the Heraka movement is highly applicable in modern context, especially when speaking of women developing their communities. The example of Rani Gaidinliu leadership is one of the strongest illustrations of a woman who applies the spiritual, social, and political authority into her human society. The mobilisation of youth, the development of village institution like kelumki and the creation of collective identity are examples of how culturally based leadership models can be effective. With the modern developments of discourse, Heraka traditions emphasize the way the indigenous principles of cooperation, ethical behavior, and community involvement may motivate female leadership and grassroots development.

Key words: Indigenous community, Heraka, Women, Development

Origin of Heraka Movement

The history of Heraka can be traced back to the agrarian and cultural crisis of the 1930s among the Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei Nagas (Kamei, 2004; Pamei, 2001). The movement led by Jadonang demanded resorting to ancestral worship of Tingwang, the highest deity (similar to Vedic monotheism) and rejection of alien practices. Its initial period (c.1928-1931) won popular following commitments of a millenarian heguangram (free community), a Utopian resurrection of colonialism (Worsley, 1968). Jadonang declared a Naga Raj under Tingwang and encouraged non-payment of taxes to the British - acts rated as subversive by the British records. He was martyred at execution in 1931 and his movement was passed on to his cousin Rani Gaidinliu Gaidinliu (born 1915) who within no time extended Heraka into Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. She structured the youths into voluntary brigades to carry out reconstruction of villages and prayers in the morning in community halls. These Kelumki prayer houses developed nationalism of unity, discipline and dharma education. British accounts tell of the rebellion of Gaidinliu: she demanded the expelled spirits of the ancestors (old taboos) and she encouraged Nagas to obey their traditional laws rather than the Christian missionaries. She even insisted on administrative

consolidation of all the Zeliangrong territories under Indian control, which was a vision of political power that would not be pursued in secessionist pre-emptions (Kamei, 2004).

In 1932, the British seized Gaidinliu (at the age of 16) and they were forced to put her under life imprisonment. The colonial governor was afraid that setting her free would lead to defiance just in like manner as wild fire. It was not until 1947 with the Indian independence that she was then free. Nationalist histories point to the fact that she was imprisoned as the testimony to her leadership: she was later granted the Padma Bhushan (1982) by independent India and was made a Padma Bhushan in 1993. This acknowledgement is given back as long-overdue accolade of a hero not at the national level popularised though with her unparalleled scope of political struggle.

Rani Gaidinliu: Leadership and Legacy

The leader and the symbol of Heraka movement is Rani Gaidinliu (1905-1993). She was born in a Zeme family and she became a disciple of Jadonang when she was a child and when he was executed, she took over the reins at the age of 16 (Longkumer, 2008). She continued the twin objectives of religious reform and political unity under her title of Ranima. The leadership approaches adopted by Gaidinliu comprised spiritual power and grassroots organising. She toured villages to educate Heraka faith and discipline, formed a sort of military unit of young people, and reformed the village (e.g. distributing labour in Paiki houses) (Longkumer, 2008). This was unique because she uplifted the position of women however, in Zeliangrong tradition, women were also shamans (herakapui) (Longkumer, 2008), Gaidinliu became a priestess and a political choice against the masculine expectations. According to Longkumer, her conception of heguanram was egalitarian: she referred to the prospect of the people receiving heguanram as a symbol of their victory (Longkumer, 2008) by calling on gender-neutral notions of liberation.

Gaidinliu was philosophically the combination of traditional custom and egalitarian ethics. Her demand was to receive equal work and ritual roles: Once renouncing animal sacrifices bit by bit, she could by 1990 the community pray with a clean hand (without blood sacrifice) (Longkumer, 2008). She instructed that the insignificant flaws of the self could be washed off on her rather than an example of self-sacrifice and accountability (Longkumer, 2008). These reforms made Gaidinliu look like a caring person and a daughter of God (in the dream-received scriptures) (Longkumer, 2008) (Longkumer, 2008). Villagers identified with this image and the moral authority of this woman was strengthened. This also had an effect on her activism, as in the historical record, she requested the British colonial government and subsequently the Indian government to consolidate all Zeliangrong territories into a single one under India (with the aim of peaceful integration) (Janetius and Lamkhotinthang 2021). This position was opposed to a number of Naga nationalists who wanted independence, in fact, from the point of view that Gaidinliu was a patriotic hero, a consensus came into conflict with the Indian state (Janetius and Lamkhotinthang 2021) (Janetius and Lamkhotinthang 2021).

Another extremely gendered component of the Gaidinliu legacy is the empowerment story. The life story of Gaidinliu as Niumai (2018) makes is an example of how an unrecognized girl could become a

leader and this could inspire more marginalized women to take on socio-political positions (Niumai, 2018). Her common involvement in the political affairs (e.g. petitioning Indian leaders in 1947) and her 14-year imprisonment had never happened to a woman who was a member of her community. This has seen her become an icon in the histories of women in the region. Gaidinliu also demanded some education; among other things, she was supposed to have mastered Zeliangrong script and Hindi in order to communicate outside of her tribe. With independence, however, her idea was only realised to a small extent, with the areas of the Zeliangrong still separated among various states, and her society was weakened by the tendencies of newer generation to either convert to Christianity or assimilate.

The legacy of Gaidinliu after independence is controversial. However, the Indian government later recognised her (e.g. by declaring her a freedom fighter in 1982, giving her a pension). There are memorials and statues in Naga. She is still Rani Maa, a borderline mythical mother figure in the Heraka - decades later, the Heraka followers still sing and chant the song "our beloved mother Gaidinliu"(Longkumer, 2008). On the contrary, not all Christian Nagas regard her with dignity or even affection and perceive the Heraka movement as a kind of anti-Christian movement.

In short, Rani Gaidinliu contributed to the contributions of Heraka and they were fundamental. She was the most influential codifier of Heraka reform, bringing new and rigid regulations (e.g. the separation of the genders during Kelumki worship (Longkumer, 2008)) and reaching wider influence of the movement. Her philosophical impact was a mix of the conventional mythic motifs (millennial deliverance) with the elements of purity and well-being of the community²³. She was a women leader who showed the ability of women to spearhead cultural rebirth as a gendered leader (Niumai, 2018; Nayak, 2025). Her controversial legacy - as a nationalist heroine of the state and as a leader, who has been taken over by party politics - demonstrates the ambiguities of the history of Northeast India.

Contemporary Relevance: Heraka Principles and Women's Development

Cultural values and the spirit of community promoted by the Heraka movement can teach several important lessons to the contemporary womenscentric development efforts. To begin with, the relations between the genders in Heraka can be discussed as rather liberal in the context of the traditional society: since the beginning, one of the women (Gaidinliu) occupied the highest religious office. This was a step in precedent - even common Herakian practice includes women in the major ritual roles (i.e. Herakapui healers and the right to participate in prayer in the village). Since the example of Gaidinliu can inspire marginalised women to become socio-political and spiritual leaders and challenge patriarchy (Kabeer, 1999), Niumai (2018) stresses that this example could influence other women in the same way (Niumai, 2018). In the case of modern projects, this implies the use of the local role models and stories to enable the leadership of women. Rani Maa may be invoked by the development module as a symbol of female agency in line with the current Indian policy of focusing on Nari Shakti (women strength) as change agents.

Second, the ethos of community-building practiced by Heraka is teach-back. The conventional ways such as community labour (paiki groups) and shared celebrations (Heliengi, Punshi) are very cohesive. Kelumki prayer-houses were also constructed by Heraka villages as the depths of village life (Longekumar, 2008). This would mean that development would be done using community forms as opposed to individual persons. One of the modules may become Heraka Village Councils (possibly in the form of a re-definition of the historical Paileu Baudi concept of local women councils (Longkumer, 2008)) to organize local functions. These would go with participatory strategies in development research, in which the notion that local collectives (typically women self-help groups or Gram Sabhas) are empowered has been successful (Kumar et al., 2021; Gupta & Rathore, 2021). In fact, the same reasoning can be seen in government programmes such as women reservation bill (one-third of seats in local bodies to women) that have recently been passed. An organizational pattern based on indigenous models would guarantee women chairing / co-chairing these village institutions, which are Heraka-informed (Kumar et al., 2019).

Third, some of the Heraka values are in consonance with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). Indicatively, the focus on purity, communal harmony, and natural worship are appeals to environmental awareness (SDG 15) and health in society. The alcohol and drug prohibition of Heraka villages reflects the concept of public health (SDG 3), which can be turned into contemporary wellness initiatives. Heraka also conventionally did not encourage discrimination e.g. prohibitions against exploitation, which is compatible with SDG 10 (reduced inequalities). These norms can be varied by a development module; e.g. encouraging communal labour to improve the infrastructure (like in MGNREGA) or green energy (using an appreciation of natural nature in Tingwang to motivate people to use solar or bio-gas) (Datta & Gailey, 2012).

Lastly, the critical analysis: despite the inspirational motives offered by Heraka, there are problems. This movement is not that massive hence its direct influence on mass development is minimal. Also, Heraka would be resistant to certain modernity traits (e.g. previous anti-education beliefs or mysticism) which would not go hand in hand with development agenda unless moderated. The Heraka culture should not be integrated in a way that neglects pluralism (or non-Heraka tribes or Christians). Another kind of revivalism that shuns inclusivity is cursed by scholars. Therefore, the inclusive community spirit of Heraka (not the exclusivism of Heraka) would be a resource of development.

These relationships are already facilitated by policy structures. The presidency of G20 in 2023 under the Indian leadership focused on women-led development (a move beyond passive welfare towards aggressive empowerment) (Sablok, 2024). Practically, this will imply coordinating any module that uses Heraka with national schemes. As an illustration, educational aspects may capitalize on Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (bettering the child ratio of girls) as reflected by the change in sex ratios (killing 918 in 2014 to 934 in 2022) (Sablok, 2024). Women entrepreneurs can be supported by PM Mudra and Jan Dhan accounts (now 55 per cent of which are owned by women (Sablok, 2024)) to finance their businesses. The government statistics support the optimistic results of the involvement of women: the

higher the percentage of women on making decisions, the better the regions are on health and education. Overall, Heraka-inspired development is modernly applicable since it aligns with the strategic priorities of India, such as the encouragement of women entrepreneurship in grassroots areas, community leadership, and the development of cultural identity stated in W20/G20 commitments [11] (Sablok, 2024). Having a conceptual module with a tap to Heraka heritage would therefore not only be a show of respect towards the native but also a step in the right direction towards the nationwide ideals of gender equality and inclusive development.

Table 1: Module Components and Alignment with National Schemes

Module Component	Relevant Government Schemes / Policies	Notes on Alignment and Objectives
Women's Councils / Leadership Forums: Establish village <i>Heraka Councils</i> with women in leadership roles	<i>Mahila Sabha</i> frameworks; 33% Reservation in local bodies; Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (1/3 reservation for women)(Sablok, 2024)	Mirrors <i>kelumki/paiki</i> community spaces; formalizes women's decision-making at grassroots (SDG 5, Panchayati Raj).
Cultural Education & Mentoring: Workshops on Heraka heritage, Naga languages, history of Rani Gaidinliu	National Education Policy (Gender-Inclusive Fund); Sachar Committee/NCERT content; Nehru Yuva Kendra youth programs	Builds cultural pride and civic knowledge; aligns with BBBP and NEP's gender-sensitized curriculum(Sablok, 2024).
Vocational Training & Entrepreneurship: Skill training in trades (weaving, crafts) and business skills	PM MUDRA Yojana; Stand-Up India; Deen Dayal Upadhyaya GRAMIN (DDU-GKY) for youth; Mahila Coir Yojana, Udyam Sakhi	Encourages women's enterprises; connecting to microfinance for start-ups (SDG 8); resonates with reported 46% startups having women directors and 69% Mudra loans to women(Sablok, 2024).
Microfinance & SHG Support: Formation of SHGs, access to credit, market linkages	DAY-NRLM (Ajeevika); SHG-bank linkage programs; PM Jan Dhan Yojana (55% accounts women)(Sablok, 2024)	Leverages SHG model for community funding; uses financial inclusion schemes (Jan Dhan, digital banking).

Health, Sanitation & Nutrition: Women's health camps, sanitation drives, nutrition education	Ayushman Bharat (women's health); Ujjwala Yojana (69% LPG to women)(Sablok, 2024); Jal Jeevan Mission (women in planning)(Sablok, 2024); Poshan Abhiyaan	Targets issues (maternal/child health, cooking fuel, water access) with women as change-agents; Heraka emphasis on purity tied to hygiene and wellness.
Education & Child Welfare: Girls' education scholarships, awareness of Beti Bachao	Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (improved girl-child ratios)(Sablok, 2024); ICDS and Anganwadi networks; NEP scholarships	Advances female literacy and school attendance; responds to gender gaps.
Digital Literacy & Tech Access: Training in digital tools, internet for women	PM Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA); e-Village Kalasha; Digital Saksharta Abhiyan	Empowers women to access markets and information; aligns with G20 digital gender gap goals (halving by 2030).
Community Projects: Infrastructure and cooperative projects led by women (e.g., farmers' groups, artisans' collectives)	MGNREGA (via Women's SHGs); Mission Shakti (Odisha model for women); Tribal Sub-Plan (TSVP) funds; NRDA (North Eastern grants)	Embeds women in development work; e.g., MGNREGA waivers for tribal women, Odisha's cash transfers to SHGs as examples.

Each component links to SDGs and national priorities (e.g. SDG 5: Gender Equality, SDG 8: Decent Work; SDG 11: Inclusive Communities). For monitoring, indicators could include women's income levels, SHG count, school enrollment ratios, and health metrics – many of which have seen improvement under existing schemes (e.g. female literacy and health outcomes improved under BBBP(Sablok, 2024)).

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