



Original Article

Birsa Munda: The Icon of Tribal Pride and Identity

Dr. Kishor N. Ingole

Associate Professor of English, Shivaji College, Hingoli

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Correspondence Address:
Dr. Kishor N. Ingole
Associate Professor of English,
Shivaji College, Hingoli
Email:
ingolekishore76@gmail.com

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Abstract

One of the brightest and most brilliant stars in the history of the Indian freedom struggle is 'Dharti Aba' Birsa Munda. His identity is not limited to just being a nineteenth-century revolutionary; he was a protector of indigenous culture, a visionary spiritual guru, and a great social reformer. At a difficult time when the tribal society was crushed under the darkness of ignorance, the trap of oppressive customs and traditions, and the tyranny of the British regime, Birsa Munda took up the torch of social transformation. He did not fight the foreign power merely with the strength of weapons but also brought an end to the mental slavery of the tribal society.

Keywords: Birsa Munda, Exploitation, Identity, Pride, Tribal, Upliftment

Introduction: The Strategic and Cultural Vision of Dakshin Digvijay

The roots of the Indian freedom struggle were deeply embedded in the indigenous culture of those who lived in dense forests and remote mountain ranges, firmly connected to the soil of this country, which was not limited merely to the boundaries of metropolitan cities or the movements of the educated class. In the late 19th century, when the British Empire was tightening its grip over the whole of India, a fierce spark of rebellion against injustice was ignited on the Chota Nagpur Plateau, which is known today as Jharkhand. This spark was that blazing volcano named 'Birsa Munda,' who, under his unfailing leadership, challenged not only the British but also the exploitative system of local landlords and moneylenders. The battle he fought to protect the rights of tribal people over water, forest, and land is a golden chapter in Indian history. He is reverently and respectfully addressed as 'Dharti Aba,' meaning the 'Father of the Earth,' because he organized the scattered identity of the tribal community and transformed it into a self-respecting revolution.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To know and understand the role of the great tribal leader and a freedom fighter called Dharti Aba, Birsa Munda.
2. To know about the tribal culture in different ways.
3. To know and understand Birsa's tribal movement.
4. To know the devotion of the great freedom fighter for the nation.

Hypothesis:

1. Birsa Munda lived a short span of life and is remembered as a strong mark of protest against British rule in India.
2. Birsa Munda's revolutionary life continues to be celebrated even today in various tribal sectors.
3. Birsa's contribution to modern India is significant in today's time.

Research Methodology:

The researcher has used the secondary method of data collection. He has collected the research-related information through the published references, books, research articles, editorial pages of newspapers, and various internet websites.

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Birsa Munda's Childhood

Birsa Munda's life journey began on 15 November 1875 in Ulihatu, a very remote village in the Bengal Presidency. Although his childhood was spent in the lap of nature, he had to face the harsh realities of life from a young age. The grip of poverty was so tight that he had to enroll in a Christian missionary school out of a strong desire for primary education. There, he was renamed 'David Munda.' His family had converted to Lutheranism, and his father was a Lutheran preacher. So Birsa was admitted to a German mission school at Chaibasa, where he learned some English. Missionaries promised the tribal people that if they followed Christianity, they would get back their land. But this never materialized. As a consequence, Birsa naturally lost his faith in the missionaries and coined the slogan, "Saheb Saheb Ek Topi Hai," meaning "All Sahebs are similar whether they are missionaries or rulers" (Sunwani and Panda, 2003, p. 152). However, inside the walls of that school, Birsa experienced a completely different struggle. The harsh criticism of their ancestors' traditions, their culture, and the customs of the Munda community began to cause deep pain to young Birsa's mind. He rejected the attempts being made to erase the original identity of the tribal communities through religious conversion. It was from this ideological conflict that the 'revolutionary' within Birsa was born. Taking a courageous decision, he left the missionary school and Christianity to return to his own religion and culture. He did not just change himself but also revived the 'Birsait' sect, which promoted a virtuous lifestyle and moral values, to pull his society out of an inferiority complex.

Birsa Munda's Fight Against the Mindset of Slavery

Birsa Munda's fight was not merely against bullets; it was against that mindset of slavery that had been imposed on the minds of the tribal people for centuries. The 'Ulgulan'—meaning the 'Great Tumult'—that he declared was not just a political rebellion but a grand sacrifice (Mahayajna) for cultural and social transformation. The oppressive forest laws introduced by the British had snatched away the tribals' rights over their own land. The common tribal folk were being crushed under the web of moneylenders' high interest. In such times, Birsa Munda gave a roaring message to end the queen's rule and establish their own kingdom. With his mesmerizing speech and divine leadership, he united thousands of tribal people. On his single call, this community stood up against the mighty British power with bows and arrows in their hands. Sarode Bhimrao states that, "in the golden history of the Indian freedom struggle, Bhagwan Birsa Munda is not just a name but a glowing symbol of tribal identity, self-respect, and a blazing revolution against injustice." (Sarode, 2026, p. 4) In the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the British rule began to tighten its grip on Indian life, its most severe consequences had to be faced by the tribal society living in the lap of nature. The 'Forest Acts' enforced by the British in 1878 and 1894 to seize control of India's vast forest wealth were fundamentally a direct assault on the very existence of the tribal people. The deeply rooted, generations-old bond that the tribals shared with 'water, forest, and land' was severed overnight, making them

strangers in their own home. By striking a blow to their natural habitat, the colonizers played a cruel game to displace them from their own native soil.

Emergence of Diku Class

In the process of exploitation, a new class called 'Diku' emerged. 'Diku' meant the outsiders—moneylenders, landlords, and brokers—who usurped the lands of the tribal people. Backed by the blessings of the British regime, these people exploited the innocence of the tribals, plundered their lands, and pushed them into a mountain of debt. In the very soil where they were once kings, they were now forced to live as 'bonded labourers'. The practice of forcing people to labour like slaves on their own lands was a blot on humanity. To rescue his brothers from this agonising and humiliating plight, a great hero named Birsa Munda emerged. He has recognised that this fight was not just for survival but for self-respect and a heritage which was passed down through generations. Around 1895, Birsa Munda began organising the scattered tribal community. The slogan 'Ulgulan', given by him, was not just a word but a 'Great Tumult' (Great Rebellion) that tore the established system to shreds. Birsa inspired his followers not only to struggle but also for moral and spiritual upliftment. The main objective of their political revolution was crystal clear: to end the oppressive rule of the British queen and establish their own rightful 'Munda Raj'. With a deeply solemn and grave voice, they roared, 'Abua raj etej jana, maharani raj tundu jana' (Let our rule begin, let the Queen's rule end), which was proclaimed by Birsa Munda, which meant, 'The Queen's rule is now over, and the dawn of our self-rule has begun.' This declaration spread like a forest wind, and thousands of tribal brothers stood ready to plunge into the blazing fire of revolution with bows and arrows in their hands.

Establishment of Birsait Sect

Birsa Munda launched a fierce crusade against the horrific practices of human sacrifice, witchcraft, and meaningless superstitions prevalent in the society of his time. Recognizing addiction as the greatest obstacle to social progress, he made a heartfelt appeal to his brethren to stay away from intoxicants. He did not merely preach; he laid down a moral code of conduct to bring about a radical transformation in human behavior. His teachings on self-purification and living a life of high moral character became the cornerstone of the cultural renaissance of the tribal community. A major milestone of his revolution was the 'Birsait' sect he established. This sect was not merely a religious movement but a social revolution. By advocating 'monotheism,' Birsa Munda bound the scattered society into a single thread. While preserving an inseparable bond with nature, he believed that the devotion to God should reside within one's inner self rather than in external rituals. The teachings of this sect infused a new self-confidence among the tribals, and they began to organize collectively. Birsa Munda gave his followers the mantra to face adversity with courage instead of fear. He adopted the good practices of both Christianity and Hinduism to uplift the people of his community and desired to remove the superstitions deeply rooted among the Mundas. He introduced various reforms,

such as shunning witchcraft, daily prayers, giving up liquor, worshipping only one God, and observing cleanliness, and urged his followers to obey them. He also asked the Mundas to follow purity, not to eat animal flesh, and to put on the sacred thread like the twice-born Hindu castes (Roy, 1912, p. 328). His religious preaching had a remarkable effect on his followers, known to the British as Birsaites. There are various songs and poems recited by the Birsaites dedicated to Birsa, such as—

“Birsa says to give up drinking rice beer and liquor.

For this reason, our land drifts away.

Drunkenness and sleep are no good.

The enemies laugh at us.

The beer distilled from fermented rice stinks.

A person's body and spirit too decay likewise.” (Chandra, 2016, p. 22)

Drinking intoxicants was a natural habit of the Mundas, but it was Birsa who made them understand that ‘drunkenness and sleep’ were not good, and they led to the gradual destruction of body and mind. Thus, through his religious preaching, he could eradicate the age-old social evils in the community to some extent.

Birsa Munda's Focus on Self-Reliance and Self-Respect

The core focus of Birsa Munda's thoughts was 'self-reliance' and 'self-respect.' He realized that to break free from the exploitation of the British and local moneylenders, political freedom alone was not enough; economic and ideological freedoms were equally crucial. Through the belief that 'the land is ours, the forest is ours, and the right over them is also ours,' he ignited a deep sense of identity among the tribal community. It was his inspiration that forged an iron fist of unity within the tribal society, shaking the tyrannical regime to its core. He instilled a fierce determination in the minds of the people to stand on their own feet and live with dignity. In this way, Birsa Munda did not remain a leader of just a specific region but became a great hero who showed all of humanity the path to living with self-respect. The Mundas even compare Birsa with Mahatma Gandhi, drawing a parallel that Gandhi fought for Swaraj; Birsa also fought for their freedom from bondage and to establish Munda Raj. Birsaites sing—

“O Mother, like the rising sun, Gandhi was born.

Like the rising moon, Birsa had come up.

O Mother, Gandhi was born for Swaraj.

Birsa had come up to put the Mundas on their feet.” (Singh, 1983, p. 285)

Though the above verse makes a comparative reference to Gandhi, the miracles and supernatural incidents related to Birsa are not copies or inspired events from Gandhiji's life, for they occurred decades before Gandhi's emergence. It seems that the verse reflects, on a later recall, the fact that the Mundas had found their father in Birsa, just like the nation had in Gandhi.

Birsa Munda's Arrest

The British Raj made relentless efforts to crush the growing discontent and rebellions among the tribal communities under its rule, specifically focusing on capturing the leader, Birsa Munda. British officers frequently planned strategic deployments, conducted

surveillance, and established a network of spies to secure his arrest. Finally, on March 3, 1900, they successfully arrested him through a highly cunning and well-planned operation inside the dense and impenetrable Jamkopai forest near Chakradharpur. Following this arrest, Birsa Munda was imprisoned in the Ranchi jail. However, by a cruel twist of fate, on June 9, 1900, at the tender age of just twenty-five, Birsa Munda passed away prematurely. Although it was officially stated that cholera claimed his life, a dark cloud of mystery and suspicion still surrounds his death today, making the saga of his sacrifice even more painful.

This sacrifice and this offering of Birsa Munda, did not go in vain. His martyrdom did not just deprive the British administration of their sleep but made them truly realise the unified strength, the resounding voice, and the unwavering self-confidence of the tribal communities. Fuelled by the fire of this sacrifice, his struggle brought about significant changes in the administration. One of the most crucial changes among these was the passing of the 'Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act' (CNT Act) in the year 1908. This historic law strictly restrained tribal ancestral lands from falling into the hands of non-tribal moneylenders and landlords, which to some extent protected their land rights. Reflecting on a deeper level, Birsa Munda's struggle was not merely for the physical ownership of land; rather, it became a brilliant and blazing crusade to protect the neglected yet rich cultural identity of the tribal society, to safeguard the symbol of their independent existence, and to revolt against the injustice imposed upon them. Despite the arrest and subsequent death, they believed that he would return, which is expressed in the following song:

“Amidst the wild forest,

O Birsa, they arrested you.

Your friends and relations mourn.

O Birsa, on your hand is the iron chain.

In front of you and behind you are mounted soldiers.

O Birsa, they took you by Ranchi Road.

O Birsa for the land you suffered.

O Birsa, You will come back again in the next life.

O Birsa, I grieve that they arrested you. I grieve that they took you away.” (Singh, 1983, p. 281)

It reflects the concern of Birsa's fellowmen when he was arrested by the mounted soldiers. They expressed their feeling that the cause of Birsa's suffering was due to his rebellion for their rights on the land. The highest point of this conflict was witnessed on 5 January 1900 at Dombari Hill near Khunti. Thousands of tribals had gathered there to listen to the thoughts of their leader. However, the cruel British forces surrounded this unarmed and peace-loving gathering from all sides and opened fire ruthlessly. That battle and bloody massacre were as fierce and heartbreaking as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Indian history. Hundreds of tribals sacrificed their lives for their motherland. Although Birsa Munda was later arrested and died mysteriously in prison, the torch of revolution he lit was never extinguished. The struggle he led remains a source of inspiration even today for millions of people fighting for their rights over water, forest, and land (Jal-Jangal-Jameen), and his status as 'Dharti Aba' in Indian history remains immortal.

Conclusion:

The three-pronged slogan of 'Jal-Jangal-Zameen' (Water, Forest, Land) given by Birsa Munda remains a source of inspiration for tribal movements worldwide and a powerful voice for their rights even today. The unparalleled struggle he waged in his short life of just 25 years was not merely against British rule; it was a proclamation of freedom against centuries of injustice, exploitation, and cultural slavery. Today, as a testament to his greatness, his oil portrait hangs proudly in the Central Hall of the Parliament of India. Furthermore, his birth anniversary on November 15 is celebrated by the Government of India as 'Janjatiya Gaurav Divas' to pay tribute to his memory. Birsa Munda is the one who raised the clarion call of rebellion against raging injustice and became the roar of pride for tribal culture. He breathed his last at a very young age, at just 25, but the torch of revolution he lit is still burning today. This great hero, who made the ultimate sacrifice for the welfare, identity, and freedom of his tribal brothers, still shines like a bright star in Indian history. His contributions to Indian history are remarkable, particularly in shaping the socio-political landscape of tribal India. Through his leadership in the Ulgulan (Great Rebellion), he united diverse tribal communities against colonial and feudal exploitation, advocating for tribal autonomy, land rights, and cultural preservation. His legacy as a symbol of resilience and justice continues to inspire modern tribal movements and policies, emphasizing the ongoing struggle for social justice and political representation. Birsa Munda's influence remains integral to understanding the history of resistance in India, particularly for marginalized indigenous communities.

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