



“Bhagwan Birsa Munda” and Tribal Leadership in India’s Freedom Struggle

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Abstract:

Every Rebellion gives birth to a revolution, and it creates history and teaches a lesson to the oppressor. The freedom movement of India gives birth to many revolutionaries who fought against British Raj and their system to get freedom. One such revolution took place in Jharkhand. One of the indigenous tribes that had long since inhabited the area was the Munda tribe. The Legendary hero of the Munda tribe, Bhagwan Birsa Munda created history by playing a role of Savior, Protector of tribal Culture, Defender of tribal administrative Structure and economic system. He raised the voice against the transformation of the tribal agrarian System into the feudal state around the Chhota Nagpur area. His achievements are even more remarkable for having been accomplished before the age of 25. The Aim of this paper is to understand the contributions of the legendary ‘Bhagwan Birsa Munda’ in struggle movement, who made a remarkable contribution to promoting tribal rights through tribal freedom movements and how he gave a right vision of nation.

Keywords: *Bhagwan, Birsa Munda, Dharti Aba, Freedom Fighter, Indian Tribal.*

Introduction:

The Indian freedom struggle is often viewed through the lens of well-known leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose. However, the movement was a mosaic of diverse resistance efforts across the subcontinent, including significant contributions from tribal leaders who have been underrepresented in mainstream historical narratives. Among these figures, Birsa Munda stands out as a seminal leader whose contributions were pivotal in mobilizing tribal communities against British colonial rule. His struggle, although primarily focused on tribal autonomy and rights, laid the groundwork for broader anti-colonial sentiments and actions in India. In the History of peasant revolt and democratic struggle in India, Birsa Munda was not a sudden flash of

light. but a continuation consequence of the previous Kol Rebellion and the Santhal rebellion. The Mundas are indigenous people of the Austrian groups. One of the most significant figures in the Indian tribal movements against the British was Munda, who was acknowledged as the leader of many tribes, including the Kharias and the Oranos in addition to the Mundas. The Munda uprising of 1899 -1900 led by Birsa Munda was one of the resilient tribal uprisings in the 19th century. He was born on 15 November, 1875 in the hamlet of Ulihatu led the ‘Ulgulan movement’, a widespread rebellion against the repressive British government and greedy local landowners (Standon 1979) [1]. His first schooling took place in the village of Dalka. He hadn't keen interest in studies since childhood and he was always trying to learn

something new. After completing his primary education Birsa Munda was admitted to the chaibasa missionary school he converted to Christianity while attending the missionary school in chaibasa and his name was Gupta David and after that his name was Birsa Daud. Soon after he realized that the Britishers and the missionaries were trying to convert tribals to Christianity. When he was in school the Germany and Roman catholic Christian agitation was at its peak. Birsa Munda became associated with the Sardari movement, from that experience he realized that not only Britishers but also Indians were responsible for the bad condition of the indigenous community. He realized that first he had to awaken his own nation and he did it skillfully.

The life story of Birsa Munda will go down in the history of the tribals as a story of emancipation of his own people who were subjected to prolonged suppression by the Britishers. He was a visionary. He realized that the Britishers have come to this land to torture the masses and carry wealth abroad. He is reckoned as a freedom fighter who led the tribals essentially to the non-tribals essentially to prevent land grabbing by the non-tribals ending them up a bonded labors in their own land. He had organized his first protest march for remission of forest dews. It was at this time the great famine of 1895 brook out.

Formative Period for Birsa Munda:

After long stay at Chaibasa from 1886 to 1890 constituted a formative period of his life this period was marked by the journal and Roman catholic Christian education. In light of the freedom struggle Sugna Munda withdrew his son from the school. Soon after leaving chaibasa in 1890. Birsa and his family gave up their membership of the German mission and ceased to be Christian and reverted to his original traditional tribal religious system. In

Singhbhum as in palamau and Manbhum, the forest settlement operations were launched and measures were taken to determine the rights of the forest-dwelling communities. Villages in forests were marked off in blocks of convenient size consisting not only of village sites but also cultivable and wasteland sufficient of the needs of villages. In 1894 Birsa had grown up into a strong young man, shrewd and intelligent, and undertook the work of repairing the dombari tank at Gorbera damaged by rain.

While on a sojourn in the neighborhood of village Sankara in Singhbhum, he found a suitable companion, presented her parents with jewels, and explained to her his idea of marriage. Later on, his return from jail, he did not find her faithful to him and left her. Birsa stressed mono-gamy at a later stage in his life. Birsa rose from the lowest ranks of the peasants, the ryots, who unlike their namesakes elsewhere enjoyed far fewer rights in the Mundari khuntkatti system. While all privileges were monopolized dairy members of the founding lineage, the ryots were not better than crop-sharers. Birsa's own experience as a young boy, driven from place to place in search of employment, gave him an inside into the agrarian question and forest matters.

Birsa Munda Contribution to the Indian History:

Birsa Munda's leadership was characterized by his spiritual enlightenment which strengthened his bond with his people and their battle. The religion believed in one God and encouraged them to return to their original religion. Munda tribe's well-known leader Birsa Munda founded a new religion called "Birsait". He wanted to reform the tribal society and so he started this "Birsait" religion on his own and declared himself as God's

messenger. People started referring to him as 'Dharti Aba'. "Birsa's vision for tribal emancipation became entwined with his reverence for 'Dharti Aba', also known as father Earth, as a result of the spiritual teachings of tribal elders and the tales of resistance", as described in 'The religion of the Munda's and other essays' by Nirmal Kumar Bose (Bose 1962) [2].

According to Nirmal Kumar Bose, the importance of "Dharti Aba' represented the tribes" perseverance and solidarity. The worship of 'Dharti Aba' gave the indigenous populations a feeling of community and shared identity by representing the life-giving power of the land. As Birsa Munda assumed the position of Dharti Aba's messenger, a spiritual element was instilled into his leadership that strongly connected with his followers. Impressed by his teachings, he became a prophet figure to the tribal people and they sought his blessings. The people of the Kharias and Orans community along with the people of the Munda tribal community allowed him to be their leader.

Birsa Munda Rebellion:

In order to build a feudal stage under the British colonial rule, the British occupied various forest and land one by one and to this end they enacted the forest Act of 1894 Prohibiting the free access of other people to the forest areas. Through this law, they took away their motherland from the people of the indigenous Community. As a result, the entire Jungle and the people of their tribal communities jumped into fight for their rights, with Courage and bow and arrows. The tribal community started fighting with the British Forces. The British government could not handle the situation and in 1895 arrested the rebels including Birsa Munda. The movement

came to a temporary halt after the arrest of Birsa Munda.

The Second Stage of the Munda Rebellion began after the release of Birsa Munda on 30th November 1897. After Releasing he toured the villages together support for his movement. He urged people to destroy the Ravana's (European devils) and set up an independent kingdom under his leadership. He used to say:

"Abua Raj Seter Jana, Maharani Raj Tundu Jana".

Means "Let the Kingdom of the Queen be ended and our kingdom is established".

The Munda Rebellion in the Ranchi Spread from 1899 to 1900 under the leadership of Bhagwan Birsa Munda. This Rebellion is known in history as 'Ulgulan' in Munda language. The word of 'Ulgulan' means Strong rebellion. The 'Ulgulan Movement' headed by Birsa Munda, called for the preservation of tribal history and restoration of their rights and dignity in addition to rebelling against British colonial control. According to K.S Singh's account in "A History of the Jharkhand Movement" (Singh 2012) [3], this movement was a potent manifestation of indigenous resistance that upended the authoritarian government's underpinnings. The aim of this revolt was to establish Forest rights. The main centre of this movement was the Dombari hill. This movement was carried out through guerilla tactics. For two years they attacked places which were loyal to the British.

On 5th January 1900 Birsa's followers killed two constables at Ethedin. On 7 January they attacked khunti police station and killed a constable and razed the houses of local shopkeepers. The Commissioner and the Deputy commissioner rushed to khunti with an army of 150 to crush the rebellion. The British

administration set a reward of Rs. 500 for Birsa Munda. The British force attacked Munda guerrillas at Dombari hill, indiscriminately firing on and killing hundreds of people. Later in 1900 he was captured by the British government in the Jamkopai forest area in Chakradharpur, which is located in Jharkhand. Birsa Munda was imprisoned in Ranchi jail and died on June 9, 1900 at the age of 25 years. Historians believe that there is a mystery about the death of Birsa Munda. They believe that Birsa Munda died of food poisoning but according to jail report, Birsa died due to cholera. About 350 Mundas were brought to justice. Of these, 3 were hanged and 44 were deported.

Significant Achievements of the Munda's Rebellion:

After Birsa's death the movement faded out. However, in 1908 the colonial government introduced the Chotanagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act. The law prohibits the transfer of tribal lands to non-tribals and protects the ownership rights of the owners. Subsequently, the British government abolished the forced labor called the "Veth Bigari" system. The Rebellion movements showed to British Raj that tribal community people also could have the ability to protest against injustice and express their anger against the colonial British government. This movement sought to preserve the tribal way of life, which was firmly entrenched in their relationship with nature and shared identity.

Bhagwan Birsa Munda and its influence on his leadership:

The title "Bhagwan" given to Birsa Munda which means "God" and is a way some tribal communities show deep respect and honor for him. This title reflects the impact Birsa Munda had on the cultural and religious

identity of these communities. Some see Birsa Munda not just as a historical leader but as someone with spiritual and divine qualities, and the title "Bhagwan" emphasize this special emotion. A profound spiritual awakening that molded Birsa Munda's personality and leadership skills had a significant impact on his incredible journey as a tribal leader and liberation fighter. The qualities that best described Birsa's leadership style were empathy, compassion, and a strong feeling of responsibility to his followers. He set an exemplary example for others to follow, exhibiting steadfast resolve and bravery in the face of difficulty, representing the spirit that 'Dharti Aba' represented for the tribes (Mahato, 1983) [4]. Birsa Munda is a legend who, while having lived for only 25 years, had a profound influence on India's struggle against the British. A tribal chieftain and youthful freedom fighter whose involvement in the late nineteenth century is remembered as a potent symbol of opposition to British authority in India. Birsa Munda was a member of the Munda tribe and a leader in his religion as well as a folk figure (Mohapatra, 2004).[5]

In the tribal area of what are now modern-day Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh in the late 19th century, the British Raj, Birsa Munda led an Indian tribal mass movement. One of the most significant figures in the Indian tribal movements against the British was Munda, who was acknowledged as the leader of many tribes, including the Kharias and the Oraons in addition to the Mundas.

The Legacy of The Birsa Munda:

Birsa Munda's legacy is still alive and many people in Jharkhand and Karnataka celebrate his birthday on November 15 every year. On the occasion of the 75 years of independence, the Union Cabinet approved the

declaration of November 15 as “Janjatiya Gaurav Divas” to commemorate the services of tribal freedom fighters. Birsa Munda presently is being worshipped as Bhagwan in the newly created state of Jharkhand. He was a pioneer of the Renaissance, so his followers considered him as ‘Earthly God’ or ‘Dharti Aba’ as Maheshwetha Devi rights in preface to her novel writes of the forest about the legendary of Birsa Munda as: “Birsa Munda is rebellion and revolution is only against on the colonialism and their exploitation but also on the dikus and missionaries who oppressed tribal people”.[6] The Following is the list of notable of legacy of Bhagwan Birsa Munda.

- The Jharkhand government has proposed a 150-foot-tall Ulgulan statue to commemorate the legacy of Birsa.
- The novel ‘Aranyer Adhikar’ (Rights to the forest) was written in 1977 by Mahasweta Devi on the life journey of the Birsa Munda as Bhagvan and his rebellion movements against British rule. This novel won the Sahitya Akademi award for Bengali in 1979.

Conclusion:

Birsa’s contribution to the Indian freedom struggle is significant not only for its immediate impact but also for its long-lasting influence on the trajectory of resistance movements in India. Birsa was not just struggling against the British but also towards ignorance in his community. He wanted to get rid the Munda community of superstition, animal sacrifice. The history of his heroism and love for Nature will be unforgettable to the entire indigenous community, the people of India. The Munda movement led by Bhagwan Birsa Munda had brought profound changes not only in the thinking of tribal people but the colonial administrator, dikhus

and among the Christian missionaries. Birsa Munda is claimed to be as Messenger of God who had born to regain the lost glory of tribal religion. The message of Munda to the tribal community is ‘to unit and fight for their rights and against injustice, live with dignity and freedom which is every person’s birth right. His spiritual enlightenment had a significant influence on the way he developed his leadership skills and his idea of tribal freedom. His ties to the Munda’s spiritual practices, particularly their adoration of ‘Dharti Aba’, gave him a strong sense of purpose and motivated him to guide his people toward a better future. While his movement was ultimately suppressed, the issues he raised and the values he championed continued to influence the broader struggle for Indian independence. Birsa Munda’s legacy endures as a symbol of indigenous resistance, cultural pride, and the unyielding quest for justice. His life and movement remind us of the diverse and multifaceted nature of the Indian freedom struggle, highlighting the crucial contributions of tribal communities to India’s journey towards independence Munda’s legacy still lives on, especially in Bihar, Jharkhand and parts of Karnataka and Odisha. His portrait hangs in the Indian parliament museum.

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