



Bhagwan Birsa Munda and Tribal Leadership in India's Freedom Struggle

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Abstract:

Bhagwan Birsa Munda (1875–1900) stands as a seminal figure in India's anti-colonial movement, particularly among tribal communities in the Chotanagpur plateau (now Jharkhand). His leadership during the Ulgulan (Great Rebellion) against British colonial rule and exploitative feudal systems marks a significant chapter in India's freedom struggle. This paper examines Birsa Munda's life, the socio-political context of his time, and the enduring impact of his leadership on tribal rights and national consciousness.

Keywords: *Bhagwan Birsa Munda, Ulgulan, Tribal Leadership, Colonial Resistance, Jharkhand, Indian Freedom Struggle*

Introduction:

Bhagwan Birsa Munda emerged as a pivotal leader in the late 19th century, uniting tribal communities against the dual forces of colonial exploitation and feudal oppression in the Chotanagpur region. His movement, known as the Ulgulan, was not merely a rebellion but a comprehensive socio-political and cultural assertion of tribal identity and autonomy. This paper delves into Birsa Munda's leadership, the socio-political structures of the tribal communities, and the lasting legacy of his contributions to India's freedom struggle.

Literature Review:

Recent scholarly works have illuminated various facets of Birsa Munda's life and legacy:

Anjana Helen Bara examines the Ulgulan movement, focusing on the transformation of

Birsa Munda into a revered leader and the role of religion in mobilizing tribal communities against colonial oppression.

Sanyassi et al. (2023) highlight Birsa Munda's efforts in protecting the cultural heritage of the Munda tribe, emphasizing his leadership in reviving traditional practices and instilling a sense of pride among the community.

Bishwanath Mahato (1983) in his book "Birsa Munda: The Tribal Hero," delves into Birsa's spiritual enlightenment and his vision for tribal freedom, providing a comprehensive understanding of his ideological framework.

These studies collectively underscore the significance of Birsa Munda's leadership in shaping tribal resistance movements and his enduring impact on India's freedom struggle.

Methodology:

This research adopts a historical-qualitative approach, analyzing primary sources such as British colonial records,

District Gazettes, and newspaper archives from 1898–1900. Secondary sources include scholarly monographs, journal articles, and oral histories from tribal communities. The analytical framework focuses on socio-political structures, religious mobilization, and leadership strategies, aiming to provide a nuanced understanding of Birsa Munda's role in India's freedom movement.

Tribal Socio-Political Structures in Chotanagpur:

The tribal communities in Chotanagpur operated under distinct socio-political systems:

Munda Panchayats: Autonomous councils of elders governed social and land matters within villages.

Community Land Ownership: Land was collectively owned, and decisions regarding cultivation or resource use were made communally.

Religious Institutions: Tribal spiritual leaders influenced social norms and organized communal rituals.

British interference in these systems—through the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908) and other policies—alienated land, undermined panchayats, and provoked resistance. Scholars have noted that these policies disrupted traditional governance structures, leading to widespread discontent among tribal communities.

Life and Leadership of Bhagwan Birsa Munda:

1. Early Life:

Born on 15 November 1875 in Ulihatu, Ranchi district (now Jharkhand), Birsa Munda's early life was marked by exposure to colonial exploitation, including taxation and forced labor. He witnessed the encroachment of landlords and moneylenders

on tribal lands and the suppression of indigenous cultural practices by missionaries. These experiences galvanized his resolve to lead a movement for tribal rights and autonomy.

2. Socio-Religious Reforms:

Birsa Munda advocated for the revival of traditional Munda rituals and customs, emphasizing the importance of indigenous spiritual practices in maintaining social cohesion. He opposed the influence of missionaries and sought to restore tribal pride by promoting cultural and religious self-reliance. His efforts led to the establishment of the faith known as 'Birsaitism,' which combined elements of traditional Munda beliefs with a new sense of purpose and identity.

3. Political Mobilization:

Birsa's political strategies included:

Non-payment of Taxes: Encouraging tribals to refuse colonial land taxes and rents imposed by landlords.

Restoration of Tribal Governance: Reinforcing village panchayats and communal decision-making processes.

Armed Resistance: Organizing tribal militias to confront British forces in multiple skirmishes during 1899–1900.

These strategies culminated in the Ulgulan, a widespread rebellion that challenged both colonial and feudal authority in the region.

Timeline of the Ulgulan (Munda Rebellion):

Year	Event
1875	Birth of Birsa Munda in Ulihatu.
1889	Birsa begins spiritual travels, preaching tribal revival.
1894	Emergence as a local leader, advocating against moneylenders.

1897 First recorded clashes with landlords; tribal assemblies gain momentum.

1899 Widespread rebellion; British military intervention begins.

Feb 1900 Birsa arrested by colonial authorities.

June 1900 Death of Birsa Munda in Ranchi jail at age 25.

1901–1908 British enact land reform measures acknowledging tribal rights.

This timeline illustrates the rapid escalation of the Ulgulan and its significant impact on colonial policies in the region.

Archival Evidence:

British colonial records provide insight into the perceived threat posed by Birsa Munda:

British Intelligence Report (Ranchi District, 1900): "Birsa Munda has gathered an unprecedented following among the Mundas and Oraons. His preaching of divine authority coupled with encouragement to resist taxation threatens to undermine the established order."

District Gazette, Hazaribagh (1901): "The rebellion led by Birsa Munda demonstrates the capacity of indigenous populations to mobilize against both feudal and colonial oppression. Immediate administrative measures are necessary to restore stability."

These documents reflect the British administration's recognition of Birsa Munda as both a religious leader and a political agitator.

Impact on Tribal Leadership and Indian Freedom Struggle:

1. Immediate Impact:

Temporary Disruption of British Control:

The Ulgulan led to the temporary collapse of colonial authority in parts of Chotanagpur.

Land Reforms: Post-rebellion, the British introduced measures acknowledging tribal land rights, such as the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908).

Strengthening of Tribal Identity: Birsa's leadership fostered a sense of unity and pride among tribal communities.

2. Long-Term Legacy:

Inspiration for Subsequent Uprisings: The Ulgulan inspired other tribal movements, including the Santhal Rebellion and the Munda Rebellion of 1855.

Influence on Modern Tribal Movements: Birsa Munda's emphasis on cultural revival and self-governance continues to influence contemporary tribal rights movements.

Symbolic Importance: Birsa Munda is commemorated as a national hero, with institutions like Birsa Agricultural University and Birsa Institute of Technology named in his honor.

Discussion:

Birsa Munda's movement exemplifies grassroots resistance that transcended traditional political frameworks. While urban leaders engaged in constitutional negotiations, Birsa's approach combined spiritual authority, community-based governance, and armed resistance. This multidimensional strategy underscores the diverse forms of resistance that contributed to India's struggle for independence.

Conclusion:

Bhagwan Birsa Munda's life and the Ulgulan movement highlight the centrality of tribal leadership in India's anti-colonial struggle. His fusion of spiritual authority, socio-political activism, and cultural revival created a unique form of indigenous nationalism. Recognizing the contributions of tribal leaders like Birsa enriches our understanding of India's freedom movement,

emphasizing the importance of local leadership in national liberation.

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