



---

**Jal, Jungle, Zameen : Remembering Bhagwan Birsa Munda: A  
freedom fighter and tribal leader.**

---

**Sougata Goswami**

Assistant Professor of English Department of Humanities

College of Engineering & Management, Kolaghat

**Corresponding Author- Sougata Goswami**

Email id: [sougatagoswami14@gmail.com](mailto:sougatagoswami14@gmail.com)

DOI- 10.5281/zenodo.7604780

---

**Abstract:** While understanding the historiographical interpretation of Birsa Munda's life and legacy, this article highlights the contemporary relevance of Birsa Munda's movement. Birsa Munda was an Indian tribal freedom fighter, and folk hero who belonged to the Munda tribe. He spearheaded a tribal religious millenarian movement that arose in the Bengal Presidency in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Ulgulan movement of 1899 also involved the use of weapons and guerrilla warfare to drive out foreigners. Birsa Munda is known to have played a significant role in mobilizing the tribal community against the British and forcing the colonial officials to introduce laws protecting the land rights of the tribals. Looked at from the postcolonial viewpoint, Birsa's great agitation to bring about a sea-change in the lives of the tribals seems to be a distant reality.

**Keywords:** Ulgulan, tribals, postcolonial, reality.

---

**Introduction:**

Birsa Munda's rebellion was a spontaneous reaction to the colonial exploitative land revenue system, particularly of the Permanent settlement. The critical analysis of the tribal and peasant movements of the nineteenth century highlighted that all of these movements were organized on the background of socio-cultural and economic crisis. Thus most of the leaders of these movements revoked the religion to mobilize the masses, identified as a prophet by their followers and tried to bring back the older order by denying the colonial law and revenue system.

**Objectives:**

The objectives of the proposed study are as follows:

- a. The condition of the tribal communities in the colonial period.
- b. Birsa Munda's rebellion to get back their rights of the forests.
- c. The contemporary condition of the tribals.

**Main text:**

It is significant to note that Mahasweta Devi in her novel "Aranyer Adhikar" gives us a vivid glimpse of the socio-economic condition of the Munda community. Between 1886 and 1890, Birsa's stay at Chaibasa brought him closer to Sardar's agitation and realized the oppression of colonialism. Soon he became a part of the anti-missionary and anti-government agitation. Birsa injected new radicalism into the existing struggle. Birsa's fight also inspired in formulating of the demand for the Jharkhand state, fighting for tribal rights and raising consciousness on environmental issues. As a result, the Jharkhand state came into existence on this birth anniversary, 15<sup>th</sup> November, 2000. The missionaries provided information to British officials about Birsa's activity in the village. Despite having traditional weapons, the Adivasis stood firmly against the modern armaments of the British army. The initial attack of Birsa forced the colonial government to initiate a permanent measure

to abolish the practice of forced labour by passing the communication Act of 1897. Meanwhile, Birsa was arrested and released in 1899. On 24<sup>th</sup> December 1899, Birsa mobilized almost 7000 Birsaite, including men and women and attacked the Christianized station. The revolt was known as Ulgulan or Munda Rebellion. On 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1900, Birsa Munda was arrested by the British police while sleeping with his tribal guerrilla army at Jamkopai forest in Chakradharpur. He died in Ranchi jail on 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1900 at the young age of 25. Birsa's death ended the revolution. However, the spread and intensity of the revolt forced the colonial government to change the land settlement of the Chhotanagpur region by passing Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act in 1908. The Ulgulan of Birsa had shown the path of consolidating the tribal voices and fighting for their right on the land issue. Besides, his fight for the Adivasi rights on the forest land also showed their love for the environment. In light of his opposition to the triumvirate of the colonial state, missionaries, and landlords, Birsa Munda should be remembered not only as a social reformer but also a revolutionary. As such, he is an inspiration for the present-day struggle of tribal communities against the new triumvirate of the neoliberal state and multinational companies. In this scenario, people must imbibe the ideas of Birsa Munda's struggle in the true sense, consolidate their voices, fight for their rights, and protect the environment. On the occasion of the birth anniversary of tribal leader Birsa Munda, The Government of India marked the second Janjatiya Gaurav Divas on November 15 to celebrate the contributions of tribal communities to Indian culture.

### Conclusion

To round off, Birsa Munda's rebellion took the entire British Government by storm and the most powerful, tyrannical colonial rulers in collusion with the feudal lords, money-lenders and the Zaminders made an all-out attempt to put down this rebellion with an iron hand. Consequently, Birsa along with a

large number of Munda was arrested, put into the jail, melted out severe mental and physical torture. But it redounds to the credit of Birsa that he succeeded in making the Munda community protest against the colonial rulers, against their evil administration, their judiciary and above all against the displacement of the Mundas from their own lands. It can be asserted that Birsa's agitation did not come to an end with his death, or should we say that Birsa's fight for getting back the lands for the tribals still lies smouldering in the hearts of the tribal community.

### References:

1. Joseph Bara, "Setting the Record Straight on Birsa Munda and His Political Legacy", EPW engage, Vol. 55, issue no. 30, July 25, 2020.
2. Alpa Shah, "Religion and the Secular Left: Subaltern Studies, Birsa Munda and Maoists", Anthropology of this Century, Issue 9, January 2014, London.
3. Devi, M. (1977). Aranyer Adhikar. Karuna Prokasoni. Kolkata, India.
4. Guha, R., & Chakravorty Spivak, G. (Eds.). (1988). Selected Subaltern Studies. Oxford University Press, New York, USA.
5. Barry, P. (2010). Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literacy and Cultural Theory. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Viva Books.