



Birsa Munda: A Symbol of Tribal Resistance, Rights, and Freedom

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20777383>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 24-05-2026

Published: 10-06-2026

Keywords:

Birsa Munda, Ulgulan, Tribal Rights, Munda Movement, Colonial Exploitation, Chota Nagpur, Indigenous Identity, Abua Raj

ABSTRACT

Birsa Munda (1875-1900) was one of the most remarkable tribal leaders of colonial India. He emerged from the Munda community of the Chota Nagpur region and became a powerful symbol of resistance against British colonial rule, landlordism, moneylending exploitation, missionary interference, and the loss of tribal land. His movement, popularly known as *Ulgulan* or the Great Rebellion, was not only a political revolt but also a social, cultural, religious, and moral awakening among tribal communities. Birsa challenged the colonial state and the exploitative forces known as *dikus*, while simultaneously calling for reform within tribal society. He preached honesty, unity, hard work, moral discipline, freedom from intoxicants, and the revival of indigenous faith. His dream of *Abua Raj*—self-rule of the tribal people—gave a new direction to the struggle for tribal identity and rights. Although Birsa died in Ranchi Jail at the young age of twenty-five, his movement left a lasting impact on the history of tribal resistance in India. The later enactment of the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 reflected the pressure created by tribal struggles for land protection. This article examines Birsa Munda's life, leadership, religious reform, political mobilisation, *Ulgulan* movement, arrest, martyrdom, and continuing relevance in contemporary India.

Introduction

The history of India's freedom struggle is often presented through the activities of national political organisations, urban leaders, and constitutional movements. However, the resistance of tribal



communities against colonial domination forms an equally significant part of India's anti-colonial history. Tribal uprisings took place in different parts of India much before the rise of organised nationalist politics. These movements were rooted in the defence of land, forest, culture, identity, and community-based systems of life. Among the most inspiring leaders of such resistance was Birsa Munda, who became a heroic figure in the struggle for tribal rights and freedom.

Birsa Munda was born on 15 November 1875 in the Munda tribal community of the Chota Nagpur region. His life was brief, but his contribution was extraordinary. He became a social reformer, religious leader, political organiser, and freedom fighter. He mobilised the Munda and other tribal communities against the exploitative structure created by British colonial rule. His movement challenged the authority of landlords, moneylenders, contractors, police officials, missionaries, and the colonial state.

The movement led by Birsa Munda is popularly known as *Ulgulan*, meaning the Great Tumult or Great Rebellion. It reached its peak during 1899-1900. The rebellion was a response to land alienation, forced labour, heavy taxation, cultural interference, and the destruction of traditional tribal institutions. Birsa's call for *Abua Raj*—our own rule—reflected the desire of tribal people to restore their autonomy and dignity. His slogan, “Abua Raj Ete Jana, Maharani Raj Tundu Jana,” expressed the rejection of British rule and the aspiration for self-governance.

Birsa Munda's significance lies not only in his armed resistance but also in his larger vision of social transformation. He wanted his people to be morally strong, united, disciplined, and conscious of their rights. He opposed superstition, intoxication, social weakness, and dependence on exploiters. He also revived tribal religious identity through the *Birsait* faith. Therefore, his movement must be understood as a multidimensional struggle for political freedom, social reform, cultural revival, and economic justice.

Review of Literature

The life and movement of Birsa Munda have been studied by historians, anthropologists, and scholars of tribal society. Early colonial writings described tribal communities from an administrative and ethnographic perspective. Dalton (1872), in *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, discussed the customs and social life of tribal groups in eastern India. Although such colonial accounts are useful, they often carry the limitations and biases of colonial observation.

Russell and Hiralal (1916), in *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, provided information about various tribal communities, including groups related to the Kol, Ho, and Munda. Their



work helps in understanding the ethnographic background of the Chota Nagpur region. However, these writings often viewed tribal people as subjects of administration rather than as historical actors.

Later scholars shifted attention towards tribal resistance, colonial exploitation, and identity formation. Pati (2011) examined how Adivasi communities survived, resisted, and negotiated with colonial power. Das Gupta (2011) analysed the socio-economic transition of the Ho community under colonial rule and explained the effects of agrarian change, migration, and political reorganisation in the Chota Nagpur-Kolhan region.

Singh (1983) made a major contribution through his study of Birsa Munda and his movement. He interpreted the movement as a millenarian and political struggle rooted in the social and economic crisis of the Munda community. Roy (2004) discussed Birsa Munda's vision in the wider context of tribal movements in India. Ranjan (2022) examined the political life of Birsa's memory in contemporary India and showed how Birsa continues to function as a symbol of tribal assertion.

The existing literature shows that Birsa Munda's movement was not an isolated event. It was part of a long history of tribal resistance against colonialism, land alienation, and cultural domination. This article builds on such scholarship and presents Birsa Munda as a hero of tribal rights, social reform, and freedom.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this article are:

1. To examine the historical background of Birsa Munda's life and movement.
2. To analyse the causes of the Ulgulan movement.
3. To study Birsa Munda's role as a tribal leader, social reformer, and religious guide.
4. To understand the nature of tribal mobilisation under his leadership.
5. To assess the impact of the movement on tribal rights and land protection.
6. To discuss the legacy and contemporary relevance of Birsa Munda in India.

Methodology

This article is based on historical and analytical methods. It uses secondary sources such as books, journal articles, government publications, and research studies related to Birsa Munda, tribal movements, colonial India, and the Chota Nagpur region. The article also follows an interpretative approach to



understand the social, political, economic, cultural, and religious dimensions of Birsa Munda's movement. APA style has been used for in-text citations and references.

Historical Background of Chota Nagpur

The Chota Nagpur region, covering present-day Jharkhand and adjoining areas, has been the homeland of several tribal communities such as the Munda, Oraon, Ho, Kharia, and Santhal. These communities traditionally lived in close relationship with land, forest, water, and community institutions. Their economy was based on agriculture, forest produce, collective labour, and customary rights.

Among the Mundas, the *khuntkatti* system was an important traditional landholding arrangement. It recognised the rights of the original clan settlers over land. Land was not merely an economic resource; it was connected with ancestry, identity, culture, and community life. The village system was guided by customary laws and traditional leadership.

British colonial rule disturbed this system. The introduction of revenue policies, private property concepts, landlords, contractors, moneylenders, and courts weakened tribal control over land. Many tribal cultivators lost their ancestral land and became tenants or labourers. The entry of outsiders created a new exploitative structure. These outsiders were called *dikus* by the tribal people.

Forest laws also restricted tribal access to forest resources. Forced labour, rent, debt, and police oppression increased the suffering of the people. Missionary activities brought education and some protection to converts, but they also created religious and cultural tensions. In this situation, Birsa Munda emerged as a leader who gave voice to tribal anger, suffering, and hope.

Childhood and Early Life of Birsa Munda

Birsa Munda was born into a poor Munda family on 15 November 1875. His childhood was shaped by poverty, migration, and the difficult conditions faced by tribal people under colonial rule. He grew up observing the exploitation of his community by landlords, moneylenders, contractors, and officials. These experiences created in him a deep sense of injustice.

Birsa received some education through missionary institutions. This exposure introduced him to new ideas, religious debates, and the functioning of colonial society. However, he gradually moved away from missionary influence and began to emphasise the revival of tribal customs and indigenous faith. His education helped him understand both the power of organised religion and the need for social reform.



As he grew older, Birsa became known among the people for his spiritual personality, healing ability, and powerful speech. People began to gather around him. He was seen not only as a leader but also as a divine figure. His followers called him *Dharti Abba*, meaning Father of the Earth. This title reflected the deep relationship between tribal people, land, and spiritual belief.

Causes of Birsa Munda's Movement

Land Alienation

The most important cause of Birsa Munda's movement was the alienation of tribal land. The traditional land system of the Mundas was disrupted by colonial revenue administration and the entry of landlords and moneylenders. Tribal people who had earlier enjoyed community rights over land gradually lost control over their ancestral property. Birsa's movement demanded restoration of tribal land rights.

Exploitation by Dikus

The *dikus* exploited tribal people through rent, debt, forced labour, and unfair trade. Moneylenders trapped tribal cultivators in debt. Landlords extracted rent and controlled land. Contractors and traders took advantage of poverty and illiteracy. Birsa identified these exploiters as enemies of tribal society and mobilised people against them.

Colonial Revenue and Forest Policies

British colonial revenue and forest policies were among the major causes of Birsa Munda's movement. Before British rule, the Munda tribal community followed the traditional *khuntkatti* system, under which land belonged to the original clan settlers and was managed through community rights. However, the colonial administration introduced new land revenue systems, private ownership, rent collection, and legal procedures that disturbed this traditional arrangement. As a result, landlords, moneylenders, and contractors entered the tribal areas and gradually took control over tribal land.

The British also imposed forest laws that restricted the tribal people's access to forests. For the Mundas and other tribal communities, forests were not only a source of livelihood but also a part of their culture, religion, and identity. They depended on forests for food, fuel, grazing, medicine, and daily survival. Colonial forest policies limited these rights and treated forests as government property. This created economic hardship and deep resentment among the tribal people.



These policies weakened tribal autonomy and increased exploitation. Tribal cultivators were forced to pay rent, perform forced labour, and face legal harassment. Birsa Munda strongly opposed these unjust policies and mobilised the tribal people to protect their land, forest, and dignity. Thus, colonial revenue and forest policies became an important background of the Ulgulan movement.

Major Points and Discussion

Ulgulan: The Great Rebellion

The Ulgulan, meaning the Great Rebellion, was the most important movement led by Birsa Munda during 1899-1900. It was not only a revolt against British rule but also a struggle against landlords, moneylenders, contractors, and other exploiters. Through Ulgulan, Birsa Munda raised the demand for land rights, tribal dignity, cultural protection, and self-rule. The movement gave the tribal people a new political consciousness and united them against colonial oppression.

Secret Meetings and Organisation

Birsa Munda organised secret meetings to spread his ideas among the tribal people. Dombari Hill became an important centre of planning and mobilisation. In these meetings, Birsa and his followers discussed land rights, forest rights, tribal unity, and methods of resistance. These secret gatherings helped transform the movement from a religious reform movement into a political struggle for freedom and identity.

Armed Uprising

The armed uprising was an important phase of Birsa Munda's movement. His followers attacked symbols of British authority, police stations, missionary centres, and the houses of exploitative landlords and moneylenders. They used traditional weapons such as bows, arrows, axes, spears, and sticks. Though they did not have modern arms, their courage and unity created fear among the colonial authorities. The uprising showed the deep anger of tribal people against exploitation and injustice.

Munda Raj

Birsa Munda's idea of Munda Raj represented the dream of tribal self-rule. He wanted to end British rule and restore the traditional rights of the tribal people over land, forest, and community life. His slogan "Abua Raj Ete Jana, Maharani Raj Tundu Jana" reflected this desire for self-governance. Munda Raj was not only a political idea but also a symbol of dignity, identity, and freedom for the tribal communities.

Arrest of Birsa Munda



The British government considered Birsa Munda a serious threat because his movement was spreading rapidly among the tribal people. A reward was announced for his arrest. Finally, Birsa was captured while he was sleeping and was taken into custody. His arrest shocked his followers and weakened the organised strength of the movement. However, it also increased his image as a heroic leader who sacrificed his life for his people.

Suppression of the Movement

After Birsa's arrest, the British used police and military force to suppress the Ulgulan movement. Many of his followers were arrested, punished, and imprisoned. Villages were searched, and the tribal people were forced to surrender. Although the movement was crushed by force, the spirit of resistance did not end. The suppression of the movement proved how strongly the British feared tribal unity and political awakening.

Legacy of Birsa Munda

Birsa Munda's legacy remains powerful in Indian history. His movement created awareness about tribal land rights, cultural identity, and self-rule. The Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908, which protected tribal land from transfer to non-tribals, was one of the important outcomes of tribal resistance. Today, Birsa Munda is remembered as Dharti Abba, a symbol of courage, sacrifice, and tribal empowerment. His life continues to inspire movements for land, forest, dignity, and social justice.

Conclusion

Birsa Munda was a great tribal leader, social reformer, and freedom fighter who gave a new direction to the struggle for tribal rights in colonial India. His movement was not only against British rule but also against the exploitation of landlords, moneylenders, contractors, and other outsiders who disturbed the traditional life of the tribal people. Through the Ulgulan movement, Birsa raised a strong voice for land, forest, culture, identity, and self-rule.

His idea of *Abua Raj* reflected the dream of tribal autonomy and dignity. He wanted his people to live freely according to their own customs and traditions. As a religious and social reformer, he also encouraged moral discipline, unity, honesty, hard work, and the revival of indigenous faith. Although the British suppressed his movement and Birsa died at the young age of twenty-five, his sacrifice created a lasting impact on tribal consciousness.



The legacy of Birsa Munda continues to inspire movements for tribal rights, land protection, social justice, and cultural preservation. His contribution also influenced later protective measures such as the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908. Therefore, Birsa Munda deserves a prominent place in the history of India's freedom struggle as a symbol of courage, resistance, and tribal empowerment.

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