

# “The legendary Hero Birsa Munda” of India Freedom Movement History- A Critical Analysis.

**Mr. Bhaskar Chutia**

Sissiborgaon College  
Department of History

## Abstract

*The freedom movement of India gives us many revolutionaries who fought against the British Raj and their system to get freedom. And at the same time, one such revolution took place in the state of Jharkhand. One of the indigenous tribes in India 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 the role of Savior, Protector of tribal Culture, Defender of tribal administrative Structure and economic system. Birsa Munda (1875–1900) was one of the most remarkable tribal leaders and freedom fighters in India's struggle against British colonialism. Born in Ulihatu village of Jharkhand, Birsa inspired thousands of tribal people across Eastern and Northeastern India, including Assam, to resist British exploitation and missionary interference. His Ulgulan (Great Rebellion) symbolized tribal unity, cultural revival, and the dream of self-rule (Munda Raj). This research highlights Birsa Munda's contribution to India's freedom movement, his social reforms, and his continuing legacy among tribal communities of Assam and India.*

## Keywords

*Freedom movement, Revolution, Munda tribe, Tribal communities & Legendary.*

## 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 an aggregation 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. The Mundas are indigenous people of the Austro-Asiatic 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 region. He was born on 15 November, 1875 in the hamlet of Ulihatu and led the 'Ulgulan movement', a widespread rebellion against the repressive British government and greedy local landowners (Standon 1979). 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 German 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 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 as bonded laborers in their own land. He had organized his first protest march for remission of forest dues.

## Objectives

1. To study the life and contribution of Birsa Munda in India's freedom movement.
2. To understand the causes and outcomes of the *Ulgulan*( *rebellion*) movement.

## Literature Review:

### A Literature review is an overview of previously published works on a particular topic.

Several scholars have written about Birsa Munda's historical importance.

1. S.C. Roy's "The Mundas and Their Country" (1912) provides a detailed account of Munda society and Birsa's leadership.
2. K.S. Singh's "Birsa Munda and His Movement (1874–1901)" explores his rebellion against British rule and the role of tribal consciousness.
3. R.C. Majumdar and Bipan Chandra mention Birsa's revolt as an important tribal uprising parallel to mainstream nationalist struggles.

Recent studies emphasize Birsa's continuing influence among tea garden tribes in Assam who migrated during the colonial period. These works show that Birsa's movement was not just political but also a spiritual and social awakening for India's tribal population.

## Discussion

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 of the previous Kol Rebellion and the Santhal rebellion. The Mundas are indigenous people of the Austro 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 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. His first schooling took place in the village of Dalka. He hadn't had a 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 as bonded laborers 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 broke 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. 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 for 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, 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 by 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 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. 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- (First Stage):**

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.

### **Birsa Munda - (Second Stage):**

The Second Stage of the Munda Rebellion began after the release of Birsa Munda on 30th November 1897. After Releasing he toured the village's 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 '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 1900 at the age of 25 years. Historians believe that there is a mystery about the death of Birsa Munda.

One of the most notable tribal uprisings in the history of Indian Independence was the Munda Rebellion, also known as the Munda Rebellion, also known as the Munda Ulgulan. 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, 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. 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's struggle was rooted in the oppression faced by tribal people under British landlords and missionaries.

## 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 the Messenger of God who was born to regain the lost glory of tribal religion. The message of Munda to the tribal community is 'to unite 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.

Birsa Munda's short life of 25 years left an everlasting mark on India's freedom history. His leadership awakened tribal self-respect, resistance against colonial exploitation, and social unity. In Assam and other regions, his teachings continue to guide marginalized communities toward empowerment and self-reliance. Birsa Munda stands as a symbol of courage, cultural revival, and the fight for justice, earning him the title "Dharti Aba" the Father of the Earth.

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