

Understanding the Real and the Imagined: Birsa Munda 1870- 1902

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Abstract: *Colonial India witnessed many tribal uprisings against the exploitative and infringing attitude of British rule. One such uprising was led by Birsa Munda, who steered the Munda rebellion in the Chotanagpur plateau of southern Bihar. With the demographic changes caused by the encroachment of outsiders, the native tribal people faced new challenges in maintaining their livelihood, and even their traditional culture and ancient religion faced the threat of gradual erosion. Birsa became a religious preacher, declared himself as the representative of God, and initiated various reforms in the Munda society. Legends broke out, crediting him with some supernatural powers, further advancing his leadership. In principle, he and his followers wanted to establish a 'Munda Raj,' and the myths were perhaps popularized to gain the faith and support of the people of his community.*

Keywords: *Chotanagpur, Munda, Birsa, Myth, Rumour, Reformer, Rebellion*

Introduction

According to Oxford Dictionary, a tribe is “a group of (esp. primitive) families or communities, linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties and usu. having a common culture and dialect, and a recognized leader” (Allen, 1993, p. 1303b). From this definition, we understand that tribal people are primitive communities sharing socio-economic and even religious or blood bonds. They share a common culture or dialect and may even have an accepted leader, as did the Munda tribal people. During the British period, certain forest dwellers were declared as ‘tribal people’ and bought within the modern state system and the proselytization of a new religion, Christianity. To maintain the Munda tribe within this system as well as to proselytize Christianity, it was necessary to have European officers and preachers physically present in the Munda tribal belt. This, as well as the exploitation and erosion of the Munda way of life, was actively resented by the Munda tribe. The celebrated administrator, Nari Rustomji, who worked with numerous tribal people in north-east India, wrote;

No community, tribal or otherwise, will readily welcome in its midst the intrusion of a population practising a way of life which is at complete variance with its own. (Rustomji, 1983, p.7).

And, so, it was with the Munda tribal people. The prevailing conditions then conducive to a revolt, and the missing spark to light the flame of an uprising was an able leader, which came in the form of Birsa Munda. The simple tribal people saw Birsa as a trustworthy leader and even gave him a parallel status with God. Under the circumstances, it was natural for the Mundas to spawn myths about their

hero, which left behind a trail of stories where reality and the imagined merged. This article will deal with both the myth and the reality of Birsa Munda.

The Munda Tribe previous to the advent of the British Rule:

The Mundas considered themselves the descendants of Singbonga, the race of the Asurs, and claimed that they were the original residents of the Chotanagpur area (Hallet, 1917, p.20). They were the residents of mainly Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Palamau, Singbhum, Manbhum and Dhanbad districts. Until the beginning of the communication system, the regions where the Mundas lived were unreachable, and they lived with their own customs and customary laws. As the area was mainly mountainous and forested, they worked hard for their livelihood. They had their own Mundari language in which they spoke but no written script. They were conservatives and did not want to mix up with the aliens. They were honest, and courageous with self-respect (Roy Choudhury, 1962, p.234). *Pahan*, was the religious chief of the Munda tribe, who offered public sacrifices in the *sarna*, or the holy tree, to save the tribes from wickedness, for a good yield of the crop, and as submission to the Almighty. He also settled disputes according to customary laws. The *Manki* was the secular head. Both *Manki* and *Pahan* were hereditary posts (Roy Choudhury, 1962, p.236), with no overlapping of the powers between them. There were also *bhuinhars* whose forefathers were the original clearers of the land and, thus, the founders of the villages. The *bhuinhars* had *khuntkatti* tenures or ancestry possession over the land. The Mundas had their *panchayati* system with *Manki* and *Pahan* as the authorities who resolved community problems. This ancient socio-legal system was disturbed by the advent of European interference.

Encroachment by the outsiders and its effects on the Mundas

From the first half of the 19th century, there were various tribal uprisings occurred in the Chotanagpur region, which were suppressed initially by the English East India Company and then by the British administration. Towards the end of the 19th century, there was an encroachment on the traditional livelihood of the tribal Munda community, which rose in revolt against political, economic, and religious aggression, under the direction of their young leader turned messiah, Birsa. Having obtained the grant of Dewani of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa in 1765 by the East India Company, the area of Chotanagpur gradually came under the Company's control. The outsiders (whom the tribal people designated as *dikus*) took away the lands of the original inhabitants, either forcibly or by fraud. From the core position in the agrarian arena, the Munda peasants and other tribal communities were dispossessed and turned into marginalized groups. The customary laws of the Mundas were also greatly affected by the establishment of the law courts. In the 1840s, the Christian missionaries came to Chotanagpur and started converting the tribal people through the spread of Western education and hints that a Christian administration would relieve them from the oppression of landlords.

Thus, not only the traditional system was also disturbed by the British administration, but a new burden was imposed through a new taxation system in their area. Original landholders began losing their rights over their lands, and newcomers transformed *bhuinhari* lands to their own names. This resulted in discontent, and there were periodic uprisings during the second half of the 19th century. Many of the uprooted *bhuinhars* started the Sardar movement in the 1870s, but they were suppressed by severe punishments. But the most vital uprising took place in the 1890s led by this young Munda named Birsa in the Ranchi and northern area of the Singhbhum when the entire Munda tribes rose as one in a rebellion.

Birsa Munda's religion

Birsa Munda was a religious reformer, a rebellious fighter, and a tribal hero. There is confusion regarding the exact year of his birth, and it is presumed that he was born between 1872 and 1875 (Chanda, 2016, p.21) in the village Chalkad under Tamar police station in Ranchi district. His family had converted to Lutheranism, and his father was a Lutheran preacher. So Birsa was admitted to a German Mission School at Chaibasa where he learned some English. Missionaries promised the tribal people that if they followed Christianity, they would get back their land. But this never materialized. As a consequence, Birsa naturally lost his faith in the missionaries and coined the slogan, "*Saheb Saheb Ek Topi Hai*", meaning "All *Sahebs* are similar whether they are missionaries or rulers" (Sunwani and Panda, 2003, p. 152).

By the beginning of the 1890s, he had not only left the school, denounced Christianity, and turned against the missionaries, but had also returned to his native religion. It is said that he came into contact with a *Vaishnab* monk named Anand Panre, and, under his influence, he learned about Hinduism, studied the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and accepted several Vaishnavite practices such as wearing the sacred thread, the sandalwood, sign on the forehead etc. (Chanda, 2016, p. 21). He adopted the good practices of both Christianity and Hinduism to uplift the people of his community and desired to remove the superstitions deeply rooted among the Mundas. He introduced various reforms, such as shunning witchcraft, daily prayers, giving up liquor, worshipping only one God, observing cleanliness, and urged his followers to obey them. He also asked the Mundas to follow purity, not to eat animal flesh, and to put on the sacred thread like the twice-born Hindu castes (Roy, 1912, p. 328). Although the Hindu philosophy of inner and outer purity had a great influence on him, he eventually developed his own religious philosophy. Birsa wanted to bring some purification to traditional Munda rituals, which had ill effects on the community, and some of his religious thoughts and beliefs were a challenge to the traditional religious authority of the *Pahan*.

His religious preaching had a remarkable effect on his followers, known to the British as Birsaits. There are various songs and poems recited by the Birsaits dedicated to Birsa, such as

“Birsa says, give up drinking rice-beer and liquor.
For this reason, our land drifts away.
Drunkenness and sleep are no good.
The enemies laugh at us.
The beer distilled from fermented rice stinks.
A person’s body and spirit too decay likewise.” (Chanda, 2016, p. 22)

Drinking intoxicants was a natural habit of the Mundas, but it was Birsa who made them understand that ‘drunkenness and sleep’ were not good, and they led to the gradual destruction of body and mind. Thus, through his religious preaching, he could eradicate the age-old social evils in the community to some extent.

Myths and mysteries related to Birsa

There are various rumours and myths related to the life and activities of Birsa, some of which originated out of some distinct situations and some which were created by Birsa himself as well as by his followers. One of these is that Birsa had turned into a person having miraculous power. Birsa’s own pronouncement could have added and fueled the belief that he was more than a mortal. On one occasion, he said,

Singbonga had given me everything of the world, I shall cure the sick, and therefore we shall leave the worship of the numerous spirits. I shall save the people from suffering. (Sinha, 1964, p. 50)

With such a pronouncement, myths became a part of Birsa’s biographical construct. Consider the following story where myth and reality dissolve to float a story of a miracle. In the rainy season of 1895, one day Birsa and one of his friends were moving in the forest when suddenly a thunderstorm occurred, and lightning went through Birsa’s body. His companion watched as Birsa’s face changed to glowing red and white for some duration (Roy, 1912, p. 326). This story spread through the tribal heartland, and Birsa was shrewd enough to grab this prospect by announcing himself as the embodiment of *Singbonga*. The rumours and gossip led to an increase in his fame among his tribes, so much so that gradually Mundas from all corners, who were suffering from various physical disabilities, rushed to him for succour. Birsa, on the other hand, never disappointed them and told them that if they believed him, they would get cured. Another story is that when smallpox became rampant in a nearby village, villagers sought Birsa’s help. He went there and asked them to bring the patients to an open place. He then, looking towards the sky, started uttering mantras and touched the sick many times with his sacred thread, and told the villagers to take the sick home as he would recover soon (Sinha, 1964, p. 51). There are also various anecdotes with reference to Birsa using his sacred thread in a way that it supposedly had some magical power (Luker, 2022). Many of the sick recovered, adding weight to the belief in his miraculous power. Birsa’s presence had a profound psychological effect on the patients, and when some of them got cured in the natural progress of the disease, the healings were sufficient to establish him as a divine healer. “Miracles” eventually led the people to believe that Birsa

was the incarnation of *Singbonga*. Faith had so permeated through the Munda society that when miracles failed, he defended himself by saying that the person did not come at the right moment, and people believed that too.

It did not take too long before his disciples designated him as 'Birsa *Bhagwan*'. Birsa's transformation was rapid and consequential, with a rise from a preacher to a healer, progressing gradually to a leader, a prophet and even a *Bhagwan*. Rumours spread that he was the representative of God and that he could not only cure the ill but also salvage his community from injustice. Sometimes it seems that Birsa also believed in his extraordinary qualities and used this not just to gain fame but also to uplift the Mundas.

Through his 'mystical' powers, Birsa drew the Munda people towards him. He occasionally made unusual predictions that had remarkable consequences for his believers. Birsa adopted policies intended to convince his tribes about his prophethood. His recognition spread throughout the Munda region, and "[T]he credulous Mundas...flocked in from all directions to see the young prophet newly arisen in the realm" (Jay, 1961, p.286). People travelled long distances and faced hazards, as pilgrims visiting the 'Bhagwan'. Like the traditional Indian devotees hazarding journeys to holy sites, Chalkad became the centre of attraction for the tribals of the area and beyond. (Guha, 1986, p.266)

The main reason behind Birsa's popularity was that he understood the inherent weaknesses of his community, and tried to overcome them by way of following some extraordinary methods which would increase their acceptance. Though the Sardar movement had taken place for a long period, it could not solve the problems that the poor, oppressed, and uneducated Mundas faced. Birsa assured his fellowmen that he could not only treat their physical illness but that if they followed in his footsteps, they would receive social justice by not paying the land rent. Such pronouncements led to the growth of total faith in him to the extent that no one ever in the Munda territory has gained so much recognition and popularity as Birsa Munda.

Birsa's political agitation

His religious and social activities gradually took a political turn. The Mundas and other tribal communities were suffering exploitation by the British, money lenders, and zamindars. Birsa came forward to save them and created a band trained in using bows, arrows, and swords, making the people experts in guerrilla warfare. Within a few months, there were many followers with the hope that their leader could solve all their problems. He and his followers believed that he had been sent by God to save them. Mundas believed he came forward to protect the lands of the tribal people and that he was *Dharti Abba* (father of the soil). In fact, he tried to focus on himself as the rescuer of his community from discrimination and unawareness like the role played by Ram, Krishna, and Christ in their periods (Sinha, 1964, p.53).

He got so much recognition and faith from his community that they led to the growth of overconfidence in his character and behavior.

Birsa said,

Chutianagpur belonged to us, the Mundas, therefore we shall not obey any order of the Government. We shall not pay the land tax. We shall not obey the police, the magistrate, the landlords. (Sinha, 1964, p.50).

He announced that the Maharani's raj is ended and Munda raj is coming (Hallet, 1917, p.50). As the incarnation of *Singbonga*, he declared that

on a given day fire and brimstone would descend from heaven and destroy all men on earth except those who had the good sense to repair to his village of Chalkad and stay near him on that occasion. (Hallet, 1917, p.50)

Thus, Birsa through the way of prophecy tried to endow a 'supernatural' explanation to the problem of his fellowmen (Luker, 2022).

Birsa being the first in the Munda community to give the people assurance and hope against British injustice, they became believers in his opinion. They agreed to give up what were claimed as drawbacks amongst them and follow the path shown by him. The Government wanted to restrain his growing popularity which had morphed him into a political rebel. Attempts were made to arrest him, which were vigorously resisted. On 24th August 1895, Mr. Meares, the District Superintendent of Ranchi, arrested him and 15 followers on the grounds of violating law and order (Datta, 1957, pp. 97-8). The operation was carried out at night to avoid the police from facing a violent armed mob which would have been very difficult to manage. The Government was aware of the myths centring on Birsa, and, as everyone knows, fighting a person is one thing but combating myths is a whole lot different and difficult. British concern is palpable from a government report dated 28th August 1895,

Many ridiculous sayings were ascribed to him; for example, that Government ammunition, powder and bullets, as well as all the rupees of the country, would be turned to water.¹

The administration would be helpless if the people actually believed the prophecy was true.

The arrest had a tremendous effect on the Munda community who believed in his supernatural powers. A Government report dated 6th Sept. 1895 mentioned that, "...the large crowds assembled at Chaklad, after remaining three days for the re-

¹ Unofficial reference from the Home Department, *Trust of fanatic named Birsa Munda who occasioned considerable excitement in the Lohardaga District*, 24th September 1895, No. 22549, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

appearance of Birsa Munda, after his arrest had dispersed.’² Rumour spread that when Birsa would enter the jail gates, the jail wall would fall down, so no one could imprison him. Even Birsa, on an occasion, told his followers that even if he was taken to prison, he would return to Chalkad just after four days, planting a log of wood in the prison (Roy, 1912, p. 331). The very day Birsa was taken to the prison a mud wall broke down for some unknown reason, but immediately gossip spread that as he was the manifestation of God the jail wall had fallen. Such a deep faith grew among the Mundas that they believed no one could arrest their ‘Bhagwan’. No one would believe his confinement and it was rumoured “that he had gone up to heaven, and that the authorities had only a clay figure in jail, which they pretended was Birsa” (O’Malley, 1910, p. 43). Various absurd stories spread about Birsa, such as that the government will not be able to hold him in jail, he has gone to heaven. (Singh, 1983, p.80) Thus, through these stories there was an attempt to “maintain Birsa’s divine status amongst his followers”. (Rycroft, 2004, p.59) It became necessary to suppress Birsa’s activities and “to explode the myth of Birsa’s divinity and to kill the faith” (Singh, 1983, p. 73). There was an open-air trial because the Government wanted to make Birsa’s appearance and his punishment visible to everyone present there (Rycroft, 2004, p.59). After the trial, Birsa was sentenced to two years of imprisonment in November 1895. Besides, he was also fined Rs. 50, and since he could not pay, the punishment was extended by six additional months (Datta, 1957, p.98). His followers also had to face various periods of imprisonment according to their activities.

During the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of the reign of Queen Victoria, he was freed in January 1898, sometime before the termination of his sentence. For nearly two years, there was no trace of Birsa, and maybe he was hiding in the dense forests, gathering his followers and preparing for future activities. There was also gossip that “he was leaving the earth for a time, but would return again” (O’Malley, 1910, p. 44). Govt. records show that during the period from February 1898 to December 1899, Birsa held frequent meetings with his followers in isolated places (Datta, 1957, p.100). This time, his activities took a wider shape, and he even appointed preachers among his followers to spread his political and religious thoughts and beliefs (Roy, 1912, p.335). In the meetings, Birsa and his preachers listened to the people’s complaints while preparing plans for agitations. In those meetings, Birsa ordered them to prepare bows, arrows, and swords to kill the oppressors.

In 1896-97 and 1899, there was a failure of the monsoons. Exploitation by the landlords and moneylenders was still continuing, and in the severe famines, people’s suffering was at a peak, which created unrest among the Mundas. They became rebellious under the leadership of Birsa, who was able to gain mass

² *Ibid*

popularity and sympathy for the agitation by providing help to the famine-affected people.

In November 1899, Birsa performed some ceremonial activities, showered *Bir-da* or hero water on some of his followers, and assured them that they have become unbeatable and would have the strength to destroy all the oppressors. He made his remarks that after defeating all, “the country would be ours” (Roy, 1912, p.338). After raising an army, he again led an uprising in January 1899, and his followers started armed attacks in various places in Khunti, Tamar, Basia, and Ranchi police stations. Khunti, near Ranchi, was the main quarter of the rebellious activities and had spread to other places such as Ranchi, Chakradharpur, Bandu, Tamar, Karra, Torpa, Basia, Sisai, etc. (Diwakar, 1959, p.651).

The rebellion took an organised shape and a widespread character when the bulk of the Munda population joined Birsa. On 3rd January, 1900, the Commissioner of Chotanagpur reported that,

[T]he Mundas in the south and south-east of Thana Khunti, in the Ranchi district, are in a dangerously agitated state. On the night of 24th ultimo several Christian converts and the Reverend Father Carbery, a Roman Catholic priest, were shot at with arrows and some houses were burnt...These disturbances are due to the re-appearance of a young man, named Birsa Munda, who has for years carried on a religious agitation, proclaiming himself a prophet.³

The government became alarmed, and two companies of military police were sent to quell the rebellion, resulting in many of the rebels being killed. Although they searched for Birsa in every nook and corner of the jungle, he was nowhere to be found. Finally, with the help of some spies, Birsa was arrested on 3rd February 1900 in a deep forest in the northern hills of Singhbhum. He was taken to Ranchi jail, and it was reported that he died of cholera on 9th June 1900, but there was an allegation from his community that he had been poisoned by the British. His life was too short, but in that limited time, what he did became a landmark in the history of the tribal movements in India.

The religion Birsa established did not die with his death, and his followers became known as Birsaites. This was a socio-religious movement that also led to a political awakening due to the discontent of the Munda community. It was an important aboriginal religious revitalization movement, and one renowned scholar on Birsa Munda and the Munda rebellion has recorded that “the Munda movement ran parallel to the Indian Renaissance and partook of its verities: the stress on the past, social reforms, and internal purification.” (Singh, 1966, p.200).

³ Proceedings of the Home Department, *Outbreak of the Mundas in the Ranchi District*, August 1900, Nos 326-353, National Archives of India, New Delhi

Agrarian, political, and religious factors contributed to the growth of the Munda rebellion. Birsa wanted to bring a revolution amongst the oppressed people who were suffering from exploitation. The objective of the movement was to keep the rights of the tribes over the land which they inherited from their ancestors. Birsa's rebellion was an eye-opener to the British Government, and the administration felt the necessity to solve the grievances that led to the agrarian revolt. An investigation was done over the Munda area, and in 1907, the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act was passed, which consolidated local customary rights and usages of land to stop overburdening the tenants.

Birsaites folklores

Despite the early death of Birsa Munda, his followers learned how to protest for justice. His martyrdom had a great impact, specifically upon the Munda community and generally upon the whole tribal population, by making them conscious of their own identity. He was a living legend to them, a hero, a saviour, an incarnation, and a prophet, a messiah who united them, fought against the enemies, and tried to remove injustice towards the people of his community. Birsa is recalled in various folk songs of the Birsaites, which express their passion and feelings and the influence of Birsa over them. For example;

Open the door to Birsa's religion,
Shut the door upon Satan,
Change the order of Satan
Recover the land of the Mundas,
Life –eater, inimical to intelligence!
Let the wind carry away the words of Satan,
The path shown by Birsa Bhagwan is good,
This will lead to happiness and sweetness (in life)
and to the kingdom of Heaven.” (Singh, 1983, pp. 284-5)

Thus, there was a great effect of Birsa's religion upon his community. Since they considered him their 'Bhagwan', they believed that the path shown by him was the right way, and this would relieve them from the oppression and lead them to the happiness they wanted.

Despite the arrest and subsequent death, they believed that he would return, which is expressed in the following song –

“Amidst the wild forest,
O Birsa, they arrested you,
Your friends and relations mourn.
O Birsa, on your hand is the iron chain.
In front of you and behind you are mounted soldiers,
O Birsa, they took you by Ranchi Road.
O Birsa for the land

You suffered.
O Birsa, you will come back again in the next life.
O Birsa, I grieve that they arrested you,
I grieve that they took you away.” (Singh, 1983, p.281)

It reflects the concern of Birsa fellowmen when he was arrested by the mounted soldiers. They expressed their feeling that the cause of Birsa’s suffering was due to his rebellion for their right on the land.

The Mundas even compare Birsa with Mahatma Gandhi, drawing a parallel that Gandhi fought for Swaraj, Birsa also fought for their freedom from bondage and to establish Munda Raj. Birsaites sing –

“O Mother, like the rising sun Gandhi was born,
Like the rising moon Birsa had come up,
O Mother, Gandhi was born for Swaraj,
Birsa had come up to put the Mundas on their feet.” (Singh, 1983, p. 285)

Though the above verse makes a comparative reference to Gandhi, the miracles and supernatural incidents related to Birsa are not copies or inspired events from Gandhiji’s life, for they occurred decades before Gandhi's emergence. It seems that the verse reflects, on a later recall, the fact that the Mundas had found their father in Birsa, just like the nation had in Gandhi.

Conclusion

Even though the life of Birsa Munda is surrounded by myth and rumours, there is no denying that perhaps no other tribal hero in Indian history has gained so much popularity and honour. His movement blended the agrarian revolt and religious reformation, as well as political resistance. To his community, Birsa was a heavenly character, and his rebellion assumed a great impetus, irrespective of the facts or fiction of his myths and miracles. Despite knowing the military strength of the mighty British government, he did not want to lose the hope and faith of his fellowmen in him and so sacrificed his life. Though his expected success did not immediately materialize, his love for his fellowmen and his feeling of their pulse made him their hero forever. Under Birsa’s leadership, Mundas fought a massive revitalization movement that alarmed not only the mighty British power but also left an indelible feeling among his tribesmen for generations. His agitation was termed as “*Ulgulan*” or The Great Uprising and was also one of the millenarian movements in tribal India. Activist and writer Mahesweta Debi wrote “অরণ্য মুন্ডাদের মা, আর দিকুরা মুন্ডাদের জননীকে অপবিত্র করে রেখেছে উলগুলানের আগুন জেলে বীরসাজননীকে শুদ্ধ করতে চেয়েছিল” (Debi, 1384, p. 2). (*Forest is the mother of the Mundas, outsiders have defiled the mother. Birsa sought to purify the forest/mother through the fire of the Great Uprising.*) She also added, “উলগুলানের শেষ নাই! বীরসার মরণ নাই!” (Debi, 1384, p. 322) (*The Great Uprising never ends! Birsa never dies!*) Even Birsa’s life, myths

and miracles have influenced many aborigine poets of Indian origin such as Usha Kiran Atram, a poetess who wrote:

“Birsa once again you come/
Take birth in the womb of tribal mothers/
Once again you call for Ulgulan/
Our glory of forest burnt out/
Our forest is suffering by the incurable diseases” (Ulemale, 2021, p. 117).

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