

# **Birsa Munda and the Nation<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Taking into account the context of Birsa Munda, an Adivasi freedom fighter, given special honour by the Indian nation of late, this essay relooks into his life and political legacy. Locally, in Khunti district, a fondly remembered leader for his sacrifice to protect the Adivasis from British colonial excesses, Birsa figured in the freedom fighters' list of the country only at the time of independence, pressured by the powerful Dalit-Adivasi agenda. Historical writings on him since then have showed Birsa as a freedom fighter of secondary importance, at times not even a freedom fighter proper. Writings and commentaries have also nurtured ideas incongruent to his being a leader of the Adivasi masses. The essay surveys historical and other writing on Birsa and points out the creeping misunderstandings on his persona, which are a mismatch to the honour he has received by the nation. For a judicious estimation of Birsa as a national hero, the essay pleads a scholarship that moves beyond the paradigm of treating Adivasis as backward primitives and reads an active Adivasi psyche under their various anti-colonial protests.

## **Introduction**

Birsa Munda represents the grass-root leadership in the multi-coloured Indian nationalist struggle against British colonial rule. When petitioning the British government, as practised by the Indian National Congress, became the common mode of nationalist struggle by the Indian elite, Birsa-led *ulgulan* or total revolt (1895-1900) of the Adivasis of Chhotanagpur presented a

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<sup>1</sup>Revised and enlarged version of the article on Birsa Munda in *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 55, No. 30, 25 July 2020.

case of armed resistance. A local incident, limited to the Ranchi district, shook British rule and prompted the authorities to take concrete measures to protect the Adivasi masses. Taken perhaps as anachronistic and a crude method of protest, newspapers at Calcutta and Patna reported the incidence prominently.<sup>2</sup> Local Christian missionaries and other columnists, including the rising Anthropologist S.C. Roy (later called the ‘father of Indian Ethnology’), who witnessed the incidence closely, too, wrote detailed accounts (Anonymous<sup>3</sup> 1911; O’Connor 1901; Hoffmann and Van Emelen II 2015, Lusty 1896; Lusty 1910; Vandaele 1900).

Soon after, however, the memory of the revolt faded and Birsa lay in limbo. At the time of independence, he resurfaced but as the rank and file freedom fighter. In the last three decades, Birsa is acknowledged as a national hero. Further rise in stature has been phenomenal, especially since 2000, when the Government of India chose Birsa’s birthday, 15 November<sup>4</sup>, as the date for inaugurating the new state of Jharkhand. Above all these, since 2021, the nation now observes Birsa’s birthday as the ‘*Janajati Gaurav Divas*’ (Adivasi dignity day). As the cult of Birsa soared, the political plane buoying it harboured certain incongruent ideas related to his persona and leadership. Considering this historiography, the essay reviews some of the existing narratives on Birsa and seeks to set the record straight on his life and political legacy.

The nation took a century to recognize Birsa since his demise in 1900. Locally, however, he was already a popular leader, dear to the Adivasis. In the Khunti district of Jharkhand, the centre of his *ulgulan*, he was reminisced in Mundari folk songs and folk tales. One of the songs celebrated Birsa’s leadership as follows:

For your fellowmen, Birsa,  
You stood up, Birsa;  
For your motherland, Birsa,  
You died.  
On the milk-like field, Birsa,

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the leading newspapers to publish reports were: *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *The Behar Times*, *The Bengalee*, *The Englishman* and *The Statesman and Friend of India*.

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous author is S.C. Roy, who reproduced the article, with minor changes, in his *The Mundas and Their Country* (Roy 1970: 187-204).

<sup>4</sup> The birthday and birth-place are confusing. Areeparampil finds from Gossner Evangelical Lutheran mission records of Burju Mission that he was born on 22 July 1872 and baptized as Daud on 11 August 1872. The year 1872 is corroborated by Bharmi Munda, Birsa’s close confidant, in his account (Areeparampil undated).

You fell, Birsa;  
On the curd-like ground, Birsa,  
You toppled.  
The twenty cubit turban of yours Birsa,  
Became all bloody, Birsa;  
The earth coloured *gamcha* of yours, Birsa,  
Became all stained (Zide and Munda 1969: 54-55).

Adivasis' fond memory of Birsa was for his exemplary leadership and supreme sacrifice.

### **Background of the *Ulgulan***

The *ulgulan* was the climax of a trail of Adivasi protests for over a century against injustice under British colonial rule. British administration took effective control of Chhotanagpur since 1772. It imposed a new system of exploitation, introducing different forms of revenue demands and shades of landlords as frontline agents. As a proxy of the colonial government, the landlords and their subordinates practised various kinds of excesses upon the Adivasi cultivators. The restless Adivasis lost patience and rose in arms to resist colonial rule. The first revolt took place in Tamar near Khunti in 1789.

The Adivasis opted for armed resistance since the authorities never cared for any communication with them. The aura of authority was high in the colonial mind. The British officials perceived the agitated Adivasis as habitual trouble makers and made no effort to understand them and their issues. The Adivasis, on their part, were in no mood to reconcile with the colonial evils. Since their first uprising, the protest was unabated. A significant outlet of their anger was manifest in the Kol Revolt of 1831-32 (Jha 1987). After suppressing the revolt with an iron hand, the authorities, for the first time, heard the grievances of the Adivasis through an enquiry committee. A set of half-hearted British measures followed to placate them. But after a brief restraint, the process of exploitation and deprivation of the Adivasis relapsed. The landlords and their men came back with a vengeance. In subsequent years, as the mode of colonialism changed into free trade imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century, exploitation became thorough and intense.

After a momentary lull of the post-Kol Revolt phase, the Adivasis were restive again. From the experience of the Kol Revolt, they realised that armed resistance would be futile before the British military might. Pondering over what course to follow, they were introduced to the idea of adopting the agency of Christian missions and the concept of rule by law to protect themselves, brought by the colonialists as a new political dispensation to control the colonial subjects. The missionaries, belonging to the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran mission, demonstrated to them how to take up cases with the administration and the judiciary, which would be efficacious. The missionaries did it in order to win them over as Christians. In a few cases, the Adivasis were indeed restored their lost agrarian rights. This impressed them and gave them new confidence. After the Kol Revolt, the government had already opened administrative units among the Adivasis and posted European officials, led by a Political Agent to the Governor General for the first time. Also opened, with a view to pacifying the mind, was the avenue of elementary education by a few government and missionary schools (Bara 2005). Education enabled the Adivasi mind to understand the system of British governance and decipher official documents.

The milieu reared a group of elementarily educated Adivasi ‘Sardars’ or leaders, who, since 1858, conducted a constitutional movement based on petitioning the authorities and filing court cases to defend Adivasi rights. The movement went on for four decades, during which it turned militant, claiming the end of landlordism altogether and rehabilitation of primeval Adivasi system run by *mundas* and *mankis*, the internal village headmen and chiefs of tracts of villages respectively. Responding to the movement, the British conducted two land surveys between 1859 and 1879. The whole exercise was conducted in a shoddy manner, ignoring the core issues. It resulted in Chota Nagpore Landlord and Tenant Procedure Act, 1879 which fell far short of the expectations of the Adivasis. By 1890, the movement left the Adivasi masses high and dry (Singh 1971; Bara 2007). The gap between tall claims and actual gain fumed a high degree of frustration in the Adivasi mind. The disappointment was aggravated by the memory of callous British attitude all through for over a century. This premised the emergence of young Birsa as a new leader.

### **Birsa in Adivasi Heart**

As Birsa Munda was a forgotten figure outside, Birsa’s disciples retained his memory and recorded events connected with his life and works, which they never shared with others. One

such account, for example, was by Bharmi Munda, Birsa's 'spokesman and book-keeper' who was sentenced to five years of rigorous imprisonment for his involvement in the revolt, written between c. 1910 and 1920 (Zide and Munda 1969: 46). Embedded in Adivasi heart, when Gandhi appeared in Chhotanagpur with his idea of *swaraj* during the Non-Cooperation movement, the Birsaites, in the changed situation where Birsa's method was considered irrelevant (see page 19), eagerly joined him. While joining, they spontaneously recalled Birsa in their songs:

By spinning cotton thread,  
You got swaraj,  
O, Gandhi, you got it  
By causing a tumult,  
You got Chotanagpur,  
O, Birsa, you got it (Singh 1970: 143).

When the Jharkhand movement began, Birsa came alive. On Jaipal Singh assuming leadership of Adivasi Sabha (forerunner of Jharkhand Party) in March 1939, a special issue of its organ, *Adivasi*, printed a frontispiece of imprisoned Birsa with handcuff (*Adivasi* 1939). Jaipal Singh even installed a Birsa Munda gate at the venue of the Indian National Congress session at Ramgarh (1940). In April 1940, Jaipal Singh wrote an article on Birsa, published in *The Behar Herald*. Jaipal Singh admitted that although originally from Khunti, as a young boy, he knew little about him but he observed: 'Forty years ago they [Adivasis] called him Bhagwan, Dharti Abba and an Avatar' (Singh 2017: 41). He recalled Birsa's spectacular leadership against the British rule to protect the Adivasis:

... the Birsa rebellion is the one best known to the administrators and the Adivasi alike, to the former because Birsa Munda effectively forced the Government of the day to meet his demands even halfway and to the latter because he remains the one and only man who has a concrete achievement to his credit in Adivasi reckoning (Singh 2017: 40).

Terming Birsa-led protest and its outcome as a watershed in Adivasis' providence, Jaipal Singh hoped for a place for him in Indian history (Singh 2017: 44). Taking a nudge, his

colleague, Julius Tigga, General Secretary of Adivasi Sabha (now Mahasabha) (1939-48) and editor of *Adivasi*, scripted an article, 'Mahatma Birsa', based on manuscripts account held by a disciple of Birsa (Singh 1966: 255). Tigga's article was apparently not published. But soon, in print, two small biographies on Birsa followed, one each by Muchirai Rai Munda and P.N.J. Purti, both local Munda Adivasis (Tiru 1949; Purti 1951).

These were the years of independence when the nation took note of the Adivasis' part in the freedom struggle. The active presence of Tana Bhagats at the Ramgarh Congress session drew the participants' attention to the Adivasi component of the nation. The Congress Souvenir of the occasion introduced the Adivasis of Jharkhand and their culture, including Adivasi 'movements', but the document was silent on Birsa and his *ulgulan*, confining comment to the making of the Adivasi Mahasabha (Hayward 1940). Meanwhile, the activities of the Mahasabha and discussion on the future of Adivasis since the coming of the Government of India Act, 1935 generated curiosity on Adivasis' historical background, including their anti-colonial protests. This was the environment perhaps that inspired historian K.K. Datta, who timely stumbled upon certain original records on Santhal revolt, to publish a book on this subject (1940), and the journal, *Man in India*, to bring out a special issue on Adivasi rebellion (1945) (Datta 1940; *Man in India* 1945).

The two publications above on Birsa drew upon memories, a few manuscripts on Birsa at the disposal of his disciples and some official accounts. They retrieved Birsa from obscurity and initiated to put his life and works before the nation for posterity. Jharkhand movement's invocation of the name Birsa was perhaps what prompted the Khunti branch of *Adim Jati Seva Mandal* to publish Muchi Rai's book. Adim Jati Seva Mandal was a social work agency associated with the Indian National Congress. Its network helped in disseminating the Birsa story outside Chhotanagpur. As details on Birsa spread, admiration for him rose elsewhere. The name found currency in political action. It came to depict Adivasi aspiration, assertion and liberation across the country. At present, Birsa inspires activists concerned with social justice for mobilising Adivasis, Dalits and other lower classes far and wide across the country.

### **From Obscurity to Limelight**

The above tracts on Birsa Munda stimulated scholars for detailed work on him. Generally speaking, the Adivasi freedom fighter heroes are a neglected subject by historians and others.

Though aware of their roles, we hardly come across writings, for instance, on Tilka Majhi of Santhal uprising (1784), Chakra Bisoy of the Kondh revolt (1850), Sidhu and Kanhu of the Santhal revolt (1855-56), Tantia Bhil of Bhil uprising (1878-89), Thammandora of Rampa rebellion (1879-80), Gunda Dhur of Bastar rebellion or Bhumkal, Jatra Oraon of Tana Bhagat movement (1914-21), Alluri Sitarama Raju of Rampa rebellion (1922) and Rani Guidinliu of Naga revolt (1932).

In the huge corpus of writings on the freedom struggle, historians rarely care to deal with the Adivasi freedom fighters. This is true with the Government of India-sponsored four-volume, *History of the Freedom Movement in India* by Tara Chand (1961-72). Even *Towards Freedom* volumes, published by the *Indian Council of Historical Research* pay scant attention to the subject. Despite such a scenario, Birsa Munda emerged as a privileged exception. After independence, the Government of Bihar published a book titled *History of the Freedom Movement in Bihar* (1957), which contained a chapter on Birsa (Datta 1957: 96-105). This was the historian's first writing on him. However, the space given to Birsa Munda by Datta was tiny – only 10 pages in a large book of 640 pages. Nonetheless, the piece stoked research interest on the subject. The Bihar Tribal Research Institute undertook a project on the life and works of Birsa, leading to a publication (Sinha 1964).

More than the space allotted, the scholarly trajectory on Birsa is noteworthy. Early writings by Datta and Sinha attempted to dovetail Birsa's role to the mainstream nationalist movement somehow.<sup>5</sup> Showing socio-religious movements paving nationalist political consciousness, Datta forges the link of Birsa as follows:

From the middle of the nineteenth century began to flow a wave of reforming activities in India through the influence of some potential socio-religious movements ... These naturally fostered political consciousness and helped the growth of nationalism. Indeed, a new spirit of awakening was pervading the different strata of Indian society. In the hilly tract of Chotanagpur, among a

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<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, Sinha assisted Datta in his Freedom Movement Bihar project (Sinha 1970:147).

section of the Adivasis there was manifestation of such spirit in the movement organized and led by Shri Birsa (Datta 1957: 96).

The link like this is often reiterated, not realising that there was hardly any relationship (Sinha 1964: 100). The Adivasi societies, in general, and in Chhotanagpur, in particular, were swayed neither by the general socio-religious reform movements nor the Congress-led nationalist movement before the Gandhian era. Whatever religious expression Birsa movement attained was locally fashioned. Datta's effort was to fill up the gap of Adivasis' involvement in the freedom struggle, overlooked so far. Notably, similar is the approach of Adivasi history for the Mutiny of 1857 and pre-Mutiny phases (Choudhury 1955; Datta 1957; Datta 1970; Roy Choudhury 1959).

The historians' general assumption is that the Adivasis were slow to respond to the nationalistic struggle. The reason assigned is Adivasis' social backwardness, which naturally made them 'emulative', borrowing substance from neighbouring superior cultures (Sinha 1964: 101). Yet, dualistically, the Adivasi feelings and sentiments are painted not dissimilar. Thus, Adivasi protests are freely clubbed together in the company of other protests under the 'anti-British' label. But while doing so, Adivasi backwardness harps back. The lukewarm Adivasis are considered 'inflammable material' in the matter of protest (Sinha 1970: 150). To get charged with proper nationalist spirit, they needed an ignition from outside. Such effect is said to have come in the early twentieth century from Mahatma Gandhi's call (Sinha 1970; Jha 1987; Shukla 2011).

### **Towards a National and Historical Model**

As this kind of historiography prevailed, Datta's own works and J.C. Jha's *Kol Insurrection in Chotanagpur* (1964) presented elaborate details of the causes and courses of Adivasis' outburst of discontent. The works hinted not only autonomous origin and functioning of the rebellions but also indicated the presence of the stupendous factor of internal colonial forces, in liaison with the British regime, suppressing the Adivasis. Datta and others are aware of 'unconnected disturbances' of the Adivasis, as Santhal Revolt was with the Mutiny (Datta 1940: 1). Yet, scholars fail to recognise their independent conduct.

Taking the case of the revolt of 1831-32 by the Mundas and the Uraons, Jha discerns their special 'sentiments', emanating from the Hinduisation of their chiefs. But he, too, doubts the

aptitude of the Adivasis to agitate in an organised way. Jha finds the Munda and Uraon rebels as ‘extremely inarticulate’ because they were backward (Jha 1987: 2). Thus, he finds the ‘sporadic, isolated and spontaneous’ Adivasi protests being, ultimately, ‘sustained by good organization and stimulated by the charisma and ideals of Mahatma Gandhi’ (quoting K.S. Singh, Jha 1987: 55). In fact, the whole Congress period, i.e. from 1885 to 1947, is found demonstrating ‘systematic well organized and determined’ struggle and motivating the Adivasis to follow the slogans of the Congress (Mishra 1990: 2).

Against such ambivalences, Suresh Singh, *The Dust-Storm and the Hanging Mist* (1966) on Birsa Munda comes. An important feature of Suresh Singh’s work is the copious use of local manuscripts acquired from Birsa followers, besides rich archival data, and assiduously collected folklore data, affording him to present intimate details on Birsa’s life and the *ulgulan*. The work provides descriptive particulars on the background and making of the *ulgulan*, its specificities and ideological content, and memory of the Birsa cult. A comprehensive work with an anthropo-historical approach, it appealed to social scientists widely.

The work’s literary-type diction sent a special sequel to the literary turf. The Birsa story became popular in the literary circle. It prompted the publication of books by the National Book Trust and the Publications Division of the government for general readers. In 1977, Sahitya Akademi published an award-winning novel, *Aranyer Adhikar* (in Bengali, translated into Hindi as *Jangal Ke Dawedar*), centred on the life of Birsa Munda, by distinguished writer Mahasweta Devi. The novel is based on the above historical account by Suresh Singh. Mahasweta Devi, besides writing other books related to Birsa, even did a small book on him (Devi 2018; Devi 1984). The literary works generated the interest of filmmakers on Birsa. A few good documentaries have given cinematic expression to Birsa’s life and social movement.<sup>6</sup>

Suresh Singh’s work also elicited a historical interest on the Adivasi freedom struggle. V. Raghavaiah, a nationalist social worker, did a discursive survey of Adivasi revolts in various parts of the country since the beginning of British rule (Raghavaiah 1971). More substantially; the subject reached the shores of historiography. Birsa story came to lend substance to leading historical theories. A well-known scholar of millenarianism, Michael Adas has selected it as one

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<sup>6</sup> Some notable documentaries are: ‘Birsa Munda’ by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2016), ‘Birsa Munda: The Real Hero’ by Doordarshan (2018) and ‘Birsa Munda’ by Prasar Bharati Archives (2019).

of the five cases from different parts of the colonial world for his advanced theorization of millenarianism (Adas 1979). Later, Ranajit Guha cites extensively Birsa Munda and his *ulgulan* to build his subaltern school of historiography (Guha 1999). From appendix treatment, Birsa has, thus, developed into a formidable subject for literary, artistic and historical discourses.

The depiction of Birsa by literary and artistic works stirred politicians to recognize Birsa as an important freedom fighter. As a rare token of honour, Birsa has been endowed with two memorials in the Parliament: a 14-foot statue in the Parliament complex and a portrait inside the Parliament building. Since then, one after another, homage has come to him, climaxing in the declaration of his birthday as '*Janajati Gaurav Divas*'.

### **Paradox of Popularity**

The bolstered image of Birsa, paradoxically, is accompanied by certain misconceptions about him. This leaves Birsa as half-understood, at times grossly misunderstood. Birsa is projected as an ordinary fighter, out to extract agrarian rights for the deprived Adivasi cultivators from the British colonial masters and his movement is denied being anti-colonialist or nationalist (Chandra 2016). With no qualm, a study, for instance, explicitly holds that Birsa's revolt was 'not an anti-colonial rebellion of the tribal freedom fighters per se' (Shah: 2014). Another set of writings, especially by Christian missionaries and their ilk, of the time of his leadership or soon after, portray Birsa as an immature 'fanatic' or 'young monkey' and adventurist with 'freaks'; his leadership is said to embody 'exaggerated and distorted expression' of Adivasi awareness (Anonymous 1911: 545; Lusty 1896; O'Connor 1901). Lastly, Birsa has been described as a sectarian – pro-Hindu and anti-Christian – instead of leading diverse Adivasi masses (Dey 2019).

The criticism against Birsa from colonialists and missionaries is understandable. Birsa, after all, unexpectedly emerged as a fierce adversary on their way. As for the missionaries, this happened at a time when the missionary project was in full swing. Even his portrayal as Hindu is imaginable. Popular Hinduism spread fast in many Adivasi regions since the pre-colonial phase and by the mid-twentieth century, the nation commonly perceived the Adivasis as 'backward Hindus' – a view theoretically ratified by sociologist G.S. Ghurye and anthropologist N.K. Bose (Ghurye 1943; Bose 1941).

Some of the above ideas on Birsa have become narrative, particularly since the formation of the state of Jharkhand when the name Birsa has thrived politically. The character of Birsa is invoked for partisan political ends, disregarding historical facts on his leadership. For example, in the context of installation of a bust of Jesuit missionary, J. Hoffmann, whom Birsa considered an enemy but otherwise a great authority on Munda society and culture and an architect of the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908 (as we see below), Birsa was described as anti-Christian and induction of Hoffmann's effigy as his insult (Dey 2019).<sup>7</sup> Perhaps because of the anti-Christian storyline, the Christian part of Birsa's ancestry is generally held back from general information on Birsa. The fact that Birsa devised his own religion which never affected the allegiance of his followers from other faiths, including Christianity, is grossly ignored. Thus, historical facts about his life and ideas are wantonly distorted, tarnishing the image of Birsa as an Adivasi mass leader. This state of affairs tears apart the soul of Birsa.

Misconception about Birsa is entrenched in the academic domain too. Birsa remains a romanticized backward Adivasi, essentially a primitive, in the existing reckoning. As a primitive Adivasi, he was supposed to tread, by nature, the path of violence whenever placed in a crisis. Bewildered, at times, he might adopt messianic or millenarian features since his backward mind would disable him from coping with the difficult circumstances in any better way than this. Birsa, therefore, would not qualify to be a nationalist but only a local fighter for local rights (Shah 2014; Chandra 2016). That this was the age of India 'a nation in making', where the plank of anti-colonialism was the crucial cause, is no consideration here (Banerjea 1925). This is because scholars fail to read any active and able Adivasi mind from their various political actions (Bara 2009). To gauge such mind in Birsa's manoeuvres, scholars need to rise, besides 're-reading the colonial archive' (Chandra 2016), to explore simultaneously other sources that are likely to reflect Adivasi thinking and attitudes better.

### **The Real Birsa**

There was nothing spectacular about Birsa's early life which was steeped in miseries. Like most Adivasis of the time, his family suffered from extensive deprivation and displacement at

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<sup>7</sup> John Hoffmann, a Belgian Jesuit Professor with St. Xavier's College, Calcutta, longed to come to Chhotanagpur and learnt Mundari since 1887. Taking lesson from his predecessor colleague Constant Lievens' disastrous conflict with the government authorities, he was pragmatic to work with them. Hoffmann's erudite effort, assisted by co-author Emelen, to know the Adivasis yielded sixteen volumes of *Encyclopaedia Mundarica*, published by Government of Bihar.

the hands of the landlords. The dire need of livelihood forced upon his childhood a peripatetic life, with not less than four shifting from one village to another. From harsh childhood, he grew into an intelligent and smiling young man with attractive features. Yet, haunted by an early bitter experience, he was sensitive to suffering in the Adivasi society. His youthful cheery face was, thus, eclipsed by a pensive and thoughtful streak.

Socially, Birsa had an eclectic upbringing. Christian missionary preaching in the area since 1845 drew his family to Christianity (Nottrott 1914), his father being employed as a catechist and boy Birsa baptized as Daud. Christianity afforded him a middle school-level education at Gossner Mission School, Chaibasa. His three years' residence there got him a smattering of English, which he used in his daily life, including in devising words to heal the sick.<sup>8</sup> Within Christianity, his first association was with the Gossner (German) Protestant mission and later, briefly, it is said, with the Roman Catholic mission. From Christianity, he relapsed to Munda animism. Birsa was even influenced by popular Hinduism of Kabir Panth kind, prevalent in the area (Singh 1966). Once he was at the spell of Anand Panre, a lower-caste local *guru*. From this, he imbibed deism. Thus, he described religious idols as detestable, padris' collections in the church objectionable, and their entering the church with boots defiling (Chatterton 1901: 138; Lusty 1896: 22). Birsa witnessed a flurry of activities of the Sardari Larai movement, preponderated by half-literate Christian Adivasi converts. Widespread deprivation of the Adivasis and their multiplying distresses deeply influenced young Birsa's mind. These life experiences not only contributed to his rise as a leader but also bore upon the method of his leadership.

As the legend goes, the idea of leading the Adivasis occurred to Birsa, when, struck by a cloud lightening while in a forest outing, his face glowed as reddish, which was described by his companions as his being delivered divine power and ability to perform supernatural acts. Seeing crowds converging to him, Birsa assumed the role of a religious *guru* – 'Bhagwan' or 'Dharti Aba' – and messiah of the crisis-ridden society. He devised his own religious tenets, practices and prayers, drawing upon Hinduism, Christianity and Munda beliefs (Singh 1966: 43-48; Chatterton 1901: 138; Anonymous 1911). Channeling people's religious gathering into political action, Birsa forayed into the agrarian cause and the way to resolve the whole ensemble of it.

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<sup>8</sup> On one occasion, he counted in English up to ten to cure an ill baby. For similar purpose, at times he improvised peculiar words of charm like 'Pulter, pewter, Walter' or 'stul, store, stare, stale'(Lusty 1896).

The issue had already gained traction by then. At that time, the Sardari Larai agitators had been fed up with their long-tried constitutional method. Birsa became their new hope. Large cadres of Sardari Larai from different parts of Chhotanagpur, many Uraons and Kharias from the southwest joined Birsa. These ‘most ardent’ followers of Birsa were tenacious on the land right question and in the forefront while executing attacks upon government offices and policemen. In 1900, the Gossner Lutheran Mission lamented that two of Birsa’s men involved in murdering a *chowkidar* in Chakradharpur were renegades of the Mission, namely, former Sardars (*Gharbandhu* 1 March 1900: 40). The ‘religious hallucination’ that the movement started with camouflaged the agrarian issues for some time (Hoffmann and Van Emelen II 2015: 567-568). But soon, agrarian subjects came to the fore and became the ‘nests of political unrest’, with Birsa as the central leader.

### **Framing the Foes for Freedom**

Though supported by Sardari Larai, Birsa emerged as a leader in his own right. He injected new radicalism into the existing protest in three ways. First, Birsa was outright to declare all foreigners – British colonialists, Christian missionaries, landlords and other exploiters, called *dikus* – as Adivasis’ enemies. This was a distinct departure from Sardari Larai leaders who, firstly, vacillated on their attitude to the Maharaja of Chhotanagpur, the symbol of landlordism, at times showing loyalty to him as ‘Lord Paramount’ and at times rejecting him (Anonymous 1869: 133-135); secondly, never disputed the supreme authority of the British rulers in their various petitions; and thirdly, though differing with the missionaries for failing to mediate with the European officials, wavered to distance themselves completely from them (PRCAD I: 129).<sup>9</sup>

Second, Sardari Larai, with radical claims, remarkably stuck to constitutional method of agitation for years despite half-hearted government responses and officials’ stony indifference to lend ears to the Adivasi side. Against this, Birsa ordered his followers to arm themselves for concerted resistance of the enemies by violent method. His command at the Dumbari Buru meeting of October 1899, as narrated by a follower before the trial court later, makes it clear:

When everyone assembled Birsa asked what troubles we suffered  
from. Jagat of Kudda and three or four others whose names I do

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<sup>9</sup> Letter dated 19 November 1887 from C.C. Stevens, Commissioner, Chotanagpur to Chief Secretary, Bengal, .(Papers Relating to Chotanagpur Agrarian Disputes, Vol. I)

not know said that we suffered from the oppression of Zamindars, and Jagirdars and the Thikadars. Birsa then told us to make bows and arrows and *baluas*, as we were greatly oppressed. We all said we would make and Birsa said that he had given a similar order at the other meetings in different parts of the country ... (Anonymous 1911: 550).

Third, Sardari Larai chanted words like ‘Chota Nagpore for the aborigines’ and Adivasi ‘raj’ or ‘nationality’, but the claim was rather meek, apparently as undulation of the demand of Indian nationhood by the Indian National Congress, about which they had learnt vaguely (*Gharbandhu* 1 June 1890: 77-78). In contrast, Birsa propounded the idea of a ‘Munda disum’, free from Chhotanagpur Maharaja, the British rule and all *diku* elements, and based on Adivasi self-rule. A Birsa song by his followers captures this:

The Ranchi law court, Birsa,  
You shook it up;  
The Duranda assembly, Birsa,  
You made it move.  
The temple at Chutia, Birsa,  
You kicked at it;  
The images of Ram and Sita, Birsa,  
You knocked them down.  
In Doesa and Khukhra, Birsa,  
You danced, Birsa;  
On the maidan of Duranda, Birsa,  
You sang, Birsa.  
In Chotangpur, Birsa,  
You raised the flag of *Khutkatti*, Birsa;  
In Naoratangarh, Birsa,  
You hoisted a green flag (Zide and Munda 1969: 57).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Ranchi law court’ and ‘Duranda assembly’ denote British rule; ‘temple at Chutia’ and ‘Ram and Sita’ Hindu Chhotanagpur Maharaja; and ‘Doesa and Khukhra’ and ‘Naoratangarh’ Adivasi rule.

Determined to protect the Adivasis, Birsa identified friends or foes clearly. The enemies were named, in local expression, ‘Rajas, Hakims, Zemindars, Christians and Samsars (non-Christian *dikus*)’, whom he asked his followers to attack (Anonymous 1911: 549). Although it looked like ethnic or religious cleansing, the guiding principle to fix the target was to see who was the direct exploiter or the source of exploitation.

Christian Adivasis, initially taken as stooges of the enemy missionaries and therefore intimidated, were later assured not to fear. Missionary Hoffmann stationed in the Munda heartland of Sarwada village, who, along with a fellow missionary, narrowly missed the rebels’ arrows during a Christmas night attack in 1899, informs us that the rebels later ‘swore high’ not to harm any Mundas, including Christian ones (Hoffmann to Grosjean, letters dated 25-12-1899 and 9-1-1900). Birsa clarified to his followers that the revolt was only meant to fight ‘the Dikus and the soldiers’. Even the ‘murderous scheme’ of Christmas night, ‘mysterious, diabolical’, was, according to a missionary observer and friend of Hoffmann, actually ‘concocted’ to frighten the Christian Adivasi brethren so that they joined the movement (Chatterton 1901: 139). Clear as to who the enemies were, the ordinary non-Adivasis sharing day-to-day life with the Adivasis remained harmless neighbours.

*Zamindars*, the traditional exploiters, were the most hated enemies. The Maharaja of Chhotanagpur was seen as usurper of authority from a *manki* (Munda chief of a confederation of villages). Believing that the inscription of his authority was embodied in a copper plate at his official shrine, Chutia Temple, one of the acts of Birsa in January 1898 after his release from jail was to sneak into it at midnight to seize that (Hallett 2016: 50; Singh 1966: 78). Birsa’s focal target was the British rulers, the patron of *zamindars* and other *dikus*.

Christian missionaries were tagged with them with the slogan ‘*topi topi ek topi*’, i.e. these Europeans, whether government authorities or missionaries, who ‘wore but one and the same hat’, were the Adivasis’ arch-enemies (Hoffmann and Van Emelen II 2015: 567). Birsa felt that despite their personal proximity to the authorities, the missionaries never got the Adivasis justice; rather, they informed the authorities about his activities from villages. Anglican missionary, G.H. Lusty, based at Murhu, a few miles away Birsa’s base, admitted in 1896: ‘...I thought it was time something should be done to stop this nonsense, and I accordingly sent a note into Ranchi to the Deputy Commissioner, suggesting that he should take some steps in the matter’(Lusty 1896: 24). That was why Birsaites believed that the Whiteman missionary deserved

‘the first arrow’ while commencing serial attacks on missionary and government establishments (Zide and Munda 1969: 55).

### **Quest for Capping the Snag**

Against the superior military arms and methods of the British, the traditional weapons and strategies of the Adivasi rebels were no match. Within five years, Birsa was captured and his revolt was over. But his spirit and method of organizing the *ulgulan* conveyed the British authorities a strong message that the Adivasi voice could not be ignored any longer. Already, after Birsa’s early attacks since 1895, the British initiated permanent measure by the Commutation Act of 1897, empowering courts to commute the feudal praedial conditions and services, viz. *rukumats*, *aswabs* and *bethbegari*, ever increasing in recent years and greatly resented by the Adivasis, to cash payments. In a bid to solve the longstanding chronic agrarian issue and pacify them conclusively, the authorities recognised the need of a complete package, in place of bitty measures taken so far.

The Government of Lower Provinces of Bengal (of which Chhotanagpur was a part), led by Lieutenant Governor, John Woodburn, felt that the crux of the matter was to get correct records of the facts on tenants’ holding. A survey and settlement operation was decided in 1901, which Settlement Officer, E. Lister, initiated the next year. The government had, in principle, decided to accord legal approval of the Adivasi land system. The government still apprehended its efficacy if it were a settlement of a general type (Hoffmann and Van Emelen II 2015: 570). Accordingly, on the basis of initial findings, the government amended the Chota Nagpur Landlord and Tenant Procedure Act, 1879 and Commutation Act, 1897 as the Bengal Act V, 1903. The new Act recognised the Adivasi land rights based on the Munda *khuntkati* concept. This prepared ground for the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908 (popularly called CNT Act, 1908), enacted after further survey findings.

The *khuntkati* land ownership system being unique, the new Lieutenant Governor, Andrew H.L. Fraser, wanted it to be comprehensible to the dealing official. To ascertain this, Fraser asked Hoffmann to prepare a note jointly with Lister for appending to a new edition of the Act of 1903. This way, the unfulfilled task of protecting the Adivasis, initiated by Birsa, fell on his adversary’s shoulder. In contrast to Birsa’s vision, Hoffmann attempted to defend the Adivasi interest within the government framework. His association was in the capacity of an expert. Advised by his Jesuit mentor, Constant Lievens, on his arrival in Chhotanagpur in 1892 and

stationed in the centre of Birsa's activities, he observed and studied the Adivasi agrarian system diligently (Ponette 1978: 5). Ever since *ulgulan* erupted in 1895, he was regularly consulted by the ignorant local officials, even in drafting the Act of 1903.

Hoffmann was a humanitarian at heart, a sympathiser of the Adivasi cause. A manifestation of his kindness for the Mundas was seen in early 1900, barely a few weeks after escaping the rebels' arrow shots. When a group of followers of Birsa, gathered for a glimpse of their detained leader at Khunti police station, were falsely framed for arson, Hoffmann rescued them by correctly interpreting their Mundari words to the visiting Deputy Commissioner (Hoffmann and Van Emelen II 2015: 569). In writing his aforesaid 'explanatory' note to the Act of 1903, Hoffmann was earnest, throwing 'a flood of light' on the unique system of Munda *khuntkati* (Carnduff 1905: iii). For help, he was specially thanked by the government, to which he politely responded: 'A word of thanks is always pleasant, but this was as nothing compared to the great joy I felt over the effects of this Act ...' (Hoffmann and Van Emelen VIII 2015: 2402).

### **Unveiling a New Era**

Lieutenant Governor Andrew Fraser described the CNT Act, 1908 as a bulwark of Adivasi rights. It symbolised the settlement of the Adivasis' outstanding agrarian question. Projected as a panacea, it was said to usher in 'a calm, sunny morning after a long destructive hurricane', bringing the Adivasis 'peace and security' (Hoffmann and Van Emelen VIII 2015: 2404). The views of Fraser and Hoffmann suggest a smug colonial mind. Scholars fall in the trap of false official claims when they read 'relative agrarian calm' in the post-*ulgulan* years (Singh 1971: 107). True, the practices of *bethbegari* (forced labour), *abwab* (feudal cess), and *rukumat* (feudal demand in kind) were ended. But oppression and deprivation of the Adivasis went on unchecked. The twin incidence of large-scale migration of the displaced Adivasi peasantry to the Assam tea plantation industry as labour and Tana Bhagat movement (1914-21), within a decade of the coming of Chotonagpur Tenancy Act (here after CNTA), 1908, indicates this.

The Birsa revolt prompted the deployment of the best of British benevolence. Lieutenant Governor Andrew Fraser, in particular, not only monitored survey operations in 1905 but also had wide consultations on the draft tenancy bill in 1907 with local officials and representatives of the landlords and Adivasis by visiting Ranchi (Government of Bengal 1908: 61-62). The government also undertook administrative expansion of the region, opening new sub-divisional offices at Gumla (1902), Khunti (1905) and Simdega (1915), purportedly for closer attention to

the neglected Adivasis. The actions were actually a mere balm to the Adivasis' sufferings accumulated over the years. Yet, the way it was brought, the CNTA Act, 1908 created an illusion in the Adivasi psyche that the land question was now settled in their favour.

As a matter of fact, most and best lands were already lost to the wily outsiders. The extent of damage of the *khuntkati* system was indicated by the remnant of only 156 intact *khuntkati* villages restricted to 144 square miles (Reid 1912: 80). The loss reduced agriculture as an insecure means of livelihood. The Adivasi masses were just taken for a ride. Briefly later, a cloud of despondency descended. Under a gloomy scenario, however, fast social and political changes in the region impelled the Adivasis to explore livelihood beyond agriculture. The towns of the region, Ranchi particularly, flashed education-based employment opportunities. By 1907, Ranchi was connected to Calcutta by railway and, between 1912 and 1916, the transitional headquarters of the newly created province of Bihar and Orissa (Van Troy 1990: 35-36). Besides attracting settlers from outside for a good climate, the town showed a swift rise in administrative and missionary establishments. The prevailing wrangle between the Bengalis and the Biharis over government job openings made the Adivasis aware of the importance of education and employment.

But the Adivasis found restricted educational avenues before them. There were just one or two government zila high schools in Chhotanagpur, which generally catered to the migrants. Christian Adivasis, already education-conscious, preferred missionary schools because of the friendly atmosphere. The town of Ranchi had a few missionary schools, but those were only of the middle level. Pressure from Adivasis compelled the missionary managements to upgrade their three middle schools at Ranchi – Gossner, St. Paul's, and St. John's – as high schools between 1896 and 1908 (Bara 2010: 156). There was a college, St. Columbia's, at Hazaribagh since 1899. But outlying the Adivasi concentration and running on a narrow denominational line, it failed to attract all the aspiring Adivasi youth.

Under the three main Christian missions, various forums for Adivasis' educational advancement emerged. The aspiration even gripped the relatively more backward non-Christian sections that formed *Chotanagpur Oraon-Munda Siksha Sabha* in 1904 to open institutions, hostels, libraries and to raise funds for needy students (Chotanagpur Oraon-Munda Siksha Sabha, undated). How Adivasis craved for an education-based new way of life is evident from a clause of the Sabha's aims and objectives that denied membership to those earlier associated with

Sardari Larai, Birsa movement or other similar movements (Ibid.). Signifying such distinctive psychological change, in 1920, a pan-Adivasi forum of the educated, *Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj*, came to deliberate on the destiny of the Adivasis.

### Conclusion

The *ulgulan* in Chhotanagpur at the close of the nineteenth century, led by Birsa Munda, a freedom fighter icon today, was the high watermark of a chain of Adivasi protests against British colonialism since its inception. In the context of the special honour of Birsa by the nation of late, this essay has relooked into his life and legacy. A local Adivasi hero for long, Birsa was discovered as an ace freedom fighter by the nation three decades ago. The discovery was actually forced upon the nation by the Adivasi-Dalit assertion in nation-making process, denied space for long, but surfaced powerfully on the eve of independence. Birsa's *ulgulan* and other Adivasi protests while resisting the British exploitative regime stirred the nation's conscience about the grave question of entrenched class domination upon the Adivasi society. The way the nation was seized of the Adivasi question at the time of independence suggests that it was an important contribution of the Adivasi protests to the nationalist movement.

Historians tend to recognise the merits of the Adivasi protests when they call them 'the forerunners of struggle against the foreign rule' and uphold the independent nature of the Adivasi initiatives. Scholars also set out to controvert negative views on the protests, such as that they were 'parochials and separatists' (Mishra 1990: 3). But, while pursuing the path, they falter. This reflects in historical writings on Adivasi revolts and movements, where the Adivasi method, strategy and object are in question. As for the method, violence is seen as a trademark of Adivasi protests. It is true that Birsa's *ulgulan* resorted to widespread violence against the perpetrators of exploitation. But the armed struggle was an act of desperation since Adivasi grievances were not attended to seriously by authorities for over a century. Various other methods, including petitioning and deposition before authorities, had already failed. It was a part of multifarious Adivasi methods that the Tana Bhagats and Birsaites responded to Gandhi's call for non-violent agitation in the early twentieth century.

The Adivasi revolts and movements generally engaged with agrarian rights. But underneath what looked mundane, there was the sub-terrain of the question of Adivasi cultural existence. The land was the bedrock of the Adivasi cultural life, according to the age-old cultural traditions of the Adivasi society. No doubt, Adivasis' land ownership was a crucial condition for their

cultural survival. Yet, the society was accommodative. Birsa's *ulgulan* shows that the target of Adivasi resistance was only the exploiter *diku*, and not those non-Adivasis who were adjusted in the Adivasi society from time to time.

In its own way, the Adivasi leadership coordinated the Adivasi struggle ably. The study of Birsa shows how in mountainous and sylvan fastness, he approached diverse groups and unified them for a common Adivasi cause. He often parried questions tirelessly in numerous meetings to motivate and clarify the cause. Birsa generally assembled his followers in strategic hilltops to prevent the authorities' access and for easy retaliation in case of an enemy attack. Failing to appreciate the singularity of Adivasi mobilisation against the common British enemy, scholars describe that the Adivasi leaders were shorn of organisational skills and proper strategy. The protests, dubbed as 'sporadic', are shown in need of Indian National Congress-type of leadership.

According to Sinha, nineteenth-century Adivasi revolts did not qualify to garner any ideology since Adivasis were a 'pre-literate' society, i.e. of low mental ability (1993: 27). Contrary to this viewpoint, Birsa's *ulgulan* had a clear vision of Adivasi *disum* that drew upon the principles of Adivasi self-rule, tested by the Adivasis for centuries, and which would be free from *dikus*. In the post-*ulgulan* years, this essence of Adivasi aspiration was funnelled into an organized movement for an autonomous Jharkhand province. The movement, led by Jaipal Singh, was under the democratic setting of the Indian nation. But without a judicious estimation of its nature, the movement is labelled as 'separatist' (Ganguly 1969). Alternatively, the Jharkhand movement is termed as 'sub-movement', as if the Adivasi movement deserved only to play second fiddle to mainstream Indian nationalism (Singh 2020: chapter 8). For proper appreciation of Adivasis' role in the freedom struggle, scholars need to move beyond the paradigm of seeing Adivasis as backward primitives and attempt to read an active Adivasi psyche at different stages of history.

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