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## **Birsa's Ulgulan: Unsung Female Heroes of a Popular Revolt**

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### **Abstract**

Birsa Munda is hailed as greatest Adivasi hero of the anti-colonial struggle and his movement is widely studied and celebrated in contemporary India. He is acclaimed as mascot of Adivasi led anti-colonial struggle, from which the subaltern society draws strength and inspiration. Advancement in scientific studies and historiography has made Adivasis and their stories visible and important. Women however are the missing links, seldom discussed and rarely studied in these accounts. In the quest of the women voices the paper attempts to discuss the role of the women in the Birsa's movement. Searching for women voices in oral and literate mediums in these equitable societies brings us closer to the patriarchal tendencies present amongst them. Albeit some women warriors as Maki Munda, Sali, Thingi, Negi, Lembu appears in the official records, women are generally missing in the accounts. Constrained by the dearth of sources, the essay attempts to discuss the position of women in this movement. Retriving their stories from *Purkha Sahitya* (ancestral literature) and using official reports, collective memory, representation, and oral and visual records as sources, the essay attempts to locate the women's voices in the Adivasi protest histories.

### **Prologue**

*Sail Rakab, a picturesque mountain almost 200 meters above the ground, gives a good look at the lush forests of the Khunti district of the Chotanagpur plateau. The winds blow hard and the chill in the air can make anyone shiver in January. But on 9th January 1900, it was not the cool winds but the cruelty of the British that sent the chill down the spine. Poor but mentally and spiritually elevated Mundas and Birsaites (followers of the Birsa religion) knew full well that the land that is quintessential to their existence, the spirit of independence that shields them from moral dilapidation of slavery and the teaching of their leader Birsa Munda needs to undergo the test. The gunpowder stacked in the bullets fired by the British that emitted smoke, flickers, and wounded people to death were being fired on men, women, and children, who had gathered there. The brave Mundas countered this with arrows and axes but stood courageously in front of the oppressor. State papers mention death of a handful of people, but the locals remember that nearly 200-300 people died on that fateful day on Sail Rakab and they remember them as martyrs. While the bravery of the people and the spirit of defiance displayed by the Mundas Adivasis in the leadership of Birsa Munda is part of the anti-colonial narrative in independent India, what went unnoticed was the sacrifice of the women martyrs of the Ulgulan.*



Fig 1: The image of Birsa Munda on Sail Rakab peak of Dombari Buru hills in Khunti district, Jharkhand

### **Introduction**

Writing the history of women is more difficult than writing history of men in general (Clarke 2004). But, writing history of women in patriarchal, subaltern, primarily illiterate society that had not fathomed that their small voices would need written records to be held with credibility in history is more difficult (Matovu 2016). Looked upon as homemakers, childbearers and subordinates of men, their voices are less heard and lesser recorded. When it comes to recording their role in struggles, the women in Adivasi India appear to be at the front of mass struggles, but one whose voices are absent in all important customary institutions and accounts. In these situations, the gender equality of Adivasi societies lauded by scholars as Alpa Shah (2011) is transformed into gender blindness. The gender hierarchy puts them at the margins in reproducing their roles in movements and conflicts. This silence is especially more disturbing when it tends to be neglected in a society that hails itself for upholding gender equality.

Major studies conducted in India on Adivasis are ethnographic and anthropological. Involvement of history in narrating stories of Adivasi past is a fairly recent phenomenon. So, the information available on Adivasi women attempts to analyse their role in marriage and kinship ties. The historical narratives- written or

oral, hardly mentions their contribution and sacrifices.<sup>1</sup> Their contributions are studied from male's perspective and their own expression gets muted. The sad reality of finding women heroes is that the records that are available, do not carry their names and refer them as wives, widows and mothers. As a society, the Adivasis of Jharkhand have treated women as equal economic partners and have given them the right to work, sing, dance and even drink openly with men. But when it comes to decision making, property rights, leadership roles, religious rights, office bearers in customary systems, they are kept at bay. The echoes of these tendencies restricts our study of women warriors in Adivasi history, especially in movements that were sustained by communities collectively.

Adivasi societies believe in finding strength in collective efforts than hero worship. In these insecure sites of history, memory, and representation, silence emerges as an agency of negation of the contribution of women in the creation and assertion of identity. In such societies, even imagining a movement without women participation is impossible. The present essay is therefore not sustained by numerous examples and detailed stories, but the nature of Munda society in which women appear as a warrior and participants. On the basis of stray references in official records and judicial papers, an attempt has been made to reconstruct their histories in the famous Ulgulan (1895-1900) of Chotanagpur, led by Birsa Munda.

Whether in the colonial or contemporary period, Adivasi women have been an essential part of the movements in India, especially in Jharkhand. Their role was of great merit in Birsa Munda's Ulgulan (1895-1900), a movement that is upheld in contemporary period as an event that established Adivasi pride.<sup>2</sup> Witnessed with a renewed interest in this century, Birsa is visualised as iconic figure (Bara 2022), ecological warrior (Chandra 2016), Messiah of primitives (Fuchs:1965), pivot point of memory politics (Ranjan 2022) and anti-colonial hero by the state. But, the women warriors of the movement are absent from all the aforementioned studies. Raising apprehension on this historical bias.

Indian historiography has been critiqued for not accommodating the voices of marginalised societies such as Dalits, Adivasis, fishermen, cattle rearer, banjaras or gypsies in its writings till late. They became part of the nation's historical account when subaltern studies changed the lens with which histories were viewed. The writings which did not mention the subaltern voices were classified as elitist historiography. Ranajit Guha (1988) in his essay 'Prose of Counter Insurgency' in his book titled *Selected Subaltern Studies* with Gayatri Charavarty Spivak, highlighted the role of Adivasis as writers of his or her own destinies. It upheld them as active participants instead of being docile observers. These narrative changed the ideology with which 'nationalist' and 'mainstream' histories were constructed. This essay is an attempt to view the movement from the lens of female participants to understand the collective identity of the Adivasis and how it upholds their role in the 'movements of

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<sup>1</sup> An exception to this norm can be stories of Sinagi and Kaili Dai prevalent in the Oraon memories of their association with Rohtasgarh fort and Fulo and Jhano's contribution in Santal Hul (1855) in Santal Pargana.

<sup>2</sup> 15 November, the birthday of Birsa Munda is not only celebrated as the 'Fondation Day' for the state of Jharkhand, but has also been declared to be the 'Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas' (Adivasi Pride Day) in 2021 by Prime minister of India, Narendra Modi.

resistance' aimed at protecting their land and landscape. Using official reports, collective memory, representation, and oral and visual records as sources, the essay attempts to locate the women's voices in the Birsa's Ulgulan. Amidst silence that haunts a female historian, challenging the dominant narratives of agency based on male voice alone is an interesting task. The essay presents a narrative where women appear as active participants in the movement.

The Munda Adivasi women, who are socially and economically important players in the Munda community are notably absent from the accounts of Adivasi revolts such as Kol Rebellion (1831-32), Sardari Ladai (1858-1890), and Birsa's Ulgulan (1895-1900) in the nineteenth century Jharkhand. The essay is a humble<sup>3</sup> attempt at looking at women heroes of the movement and establishing them in the historical memory of the event. Divided into four sections, the first section attempts to analyse the importance of Ulgulan in the subaltern history. The second section attempts to define the importance of collective identity and collective memory of the Adivasis. The role of women in Munda society is detailed in the third section and the final section attempts to narrate the role, contribution, and memory of unsung women warriors of Ulgulan. I argue that Adivasi identity is not forged through hero narratives, but through collective participation and resistance. This is also echoed by Meghnath, the President award winning film director from Jharkhand, who asserts, 'Birsa, as we come to know today through such massive heroic commemoration virtually in all corners of Jharkhand, and the nation, remains one among equals in Adivasi society' (Ranjan: 2022:196).

The essay looks at this aspect of Adivasi history while creating possibilities for feminist empathetic listening as a way to create ethical discursive space for the 'other' to exist.

### **The importance of Birsa Munda**

Birsa Munda is the leader of Ulgulan (1895-1900) of the Chotanagpur plateau and is also considered to be the god by the adherents of the faith founded by him, known as the 'Birsa Dharam'. Since independence, he has been looked upon as a rebel, fighter, and anti-colonial hero in India. Birsa Munda is the epitome of freedom, struggle, and sacrifice for the subaltern community of India. Starting as a religious preacher, Birsa Munda evolved into an anti-colonial hero and hope for his community, that was not just losing rights over its land and forest but also its culture, religion, and society. He was considered *Bhagwan* (god) and *Dharti Aba* (father of the world) by his followers. He has been raised to the status of a strong Adivasi freedom fighter and upholder of a revivalist movement amongst the Adivasis. His life, works and struggles have guided the entire community of subalterns for more than a century and a quarter. Considered by scholars such as Ghurye (1943), N.K. Bose (1941), and others as 'backward Hindus', Adivasis are one of the biggest sections amongst the subalterns in India.<sup>4</sup> So, now when the area is exposed to the threats of mining and

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<sup>3</sup> Humble, because of dearth of sources, especially literary to establish these women martyrs.

<sup>4</sup> In the caste defined societal set up of India. Adivasis, who have been living on the margins of social order and close to the forests, have been visualized as shudras or the lowest of the castes in the societal order by mainstream Hindus. The common perception of the caste Hindus is that Adivasis are

deforestation; the memories of him, the cultural praxis of his movement, and the strength of his struggle is celebrated to proclaim Adivasi solidarity. His birthday and martyrhood are celebrated by the state and Adivasis beyond community structures; to assert the Adivasi right over *Jal, Jungle, and Jameen* (water, forest, and land) and affirm the *Adivasiyat* (Adivasi identityhood) under the sweeping influence of development-induced displacement.

The larger India believes in finding heroes and building the narrative around them, but the subaltern studies gave an alternate way of looking at peasant, agrarian, and the struggles of the marginalised (Guha 1983). It gave the urge to find the component of the discourse, the ideology that guided it, and how these events should be visualised. The said method of inquiry and criticism although not free from bias, would give us an alternate and more dependable ways of recounting these benchmark events. It should be mentioned that Birsa Munda was looked upon as Adivasi hero, even by the nationalist historiographers and his name was mentioned in the meeting of All India congress committee in 1940 in Ramgarh of Jharkhand. The colonial historiography nevertheless portrayed Birsa as a 'Munda Fanatic' (Roy, 1911), and looked upon him as a nuisance monger (Carnduff: 1905).

Amidst such descriptions emerges the subaltern studies, that visualises Ulgulan not as an isolated event but a highwater mark, in the series of storms that were witnessed in the region in the preceding and the following periods. Alternatively, the subaltern past credits the collective struggle of the Adivasis for the success of the movement. These Adivasis described as rebels in the nationalist discourse, considered it their will to be a part of the process and were not mere instruments of the will of their leader. This view accommodates and incorporates the Adivasi understanding of the self, the process, and the events that manifested in remembering more of their kith and kin as the path makers of their liberated existence. Prathma Banerjee (2009) argues that this is largely because the nationalist ethos incorporated Adivasis in its politico-historical narrative as rebels and did not accept their 'tribeness' (*Adivasiyat*) which relies on collective identity; rather than hero worship as its trait. Between the definitions of primary and secondary sources of historiography emerges the idea of insurgents being a part of their history (Guha 1983). In the contemporary period, when Birsa Munda and his movement are celebrated across the country in more impressive ways than earlier, these unsung heroes are also claiming their places in the political history of the region.

The grounds for the beginning of Birsa's struggle were richly fertilised by the movements that preceded it. Kol Uprising (1831-32) and Sardari Ladai (1858-95) had sowed the seeds of disenchantment, and resistance in the heart of the Mundas, and they were ready to give sacrifice to save their land. The movement thrived on the spirit of *Adivasiyat* and many Mundas, who cherished the dream of living with freedom and authority over their land, became its active participants. They were not overawed by the might of the British, but unitedly tried to achieve a dream that looked like an act of insanity to many colonial and Indian writers. Roy (1911), Hoffman (2015), Shah (2014) on the contrary, argue that the Birsa Munda movement was not

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'backward hindus' and this logic has been extended by sociologist Ghurye in his work. However, anthropologist N.K. Bose looks upon it as 'Hindu method of tribal absorption'.

an anti-colonial rebellion of Adivasi freedom fighters. They suggest that its support base came from his success in putting all aspects of their life together in a time of great disorder. A disorder, which was imposed on them by the Church, and was closer to the colonial state. The Christian missionaries were targeted for two reasons, first that the legal and judicial recourse that they had suggested to Munda Sardars failed to bring results, and many legislation that were passed as the Chotanagpur Tenures Act, 1869, Chotanagpur Landlord and Tenant Procedure Act, 1879, Chotanagpur Rural Police Act, 1887 (Act V of 1887) and others failed to establish the control of the Mundas over their land. Second, the missionaries openly supported the British in quelling the agrarian disturbances of 1886-87 (Roy 1911: 285-291).<sup>5</sup>

Religiously the ancestral faith of the Mundas was challenged by the Christian missionaries, who were converting them as a part of their civilizational mission. Administratively, Mundas were forced to follow a structure of law and order that was alien and distasteful for them. Economically, they were deprived of their lands and were carried to far off places as slaves and labourers. Culturally, they were considered inferiors. So, it was complete annihilation of their life, values and existence. The Mundas raised their voice collectively against this injustice. Searching for Adivasi rebels and resistance heroes is a relatively newer phenomenon. Adivasi oral narratives as folk songs, memory records and folk tales discuss their collective pains, defiance and resistance. Erll (2011: 17) affirms that subaltern communities remember the past within the framework of collective memory. This is done to create a distinct identity. To understand Adivasi movements, it is, therefore, imperative to understand the collective identity of the Adivasis.

### **Collective identity of the Adivasis and the unsung female heroes**

Collective identity has been the defining aspect of Adivasi identity across India. Community interests are bigger than individual interests, and the community finds its strength in collective responses. Naturally therefore the characteristic feature of Ulgulan was not just the charismatic figure of Birsa Munda but the collective strength of the community, which suffered heavily due to the new and superimposed agrarian structure of the colonial order. The entire community was groaning under the oppressive forces of collection of revenue by the dikus and the alien landlords. Sinha (1993) argues that, what was conferred to Zamindars as a nominal power of collection of tribute collectively from a village and submitting to the Raja of Chotanagpur, became an oppressive system of collection of rents, tributes, and services from the Mundas.<sup>6</sup> Singh (2001) asserts that the attempts at breaking this collective structure was resisted from the Adivasis since its very outset in Kol uprising (1831-32) and Sardari Ladai (1858-1895) in the region.

During the Birsa's Ulgulan this collective identity was evident in the coming together of Christian Mundas, *Sarna* (ancestral faith) Mundas, and the Birsaites. It

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<sup>5</sup> The report of Mr Stevens, the then Commissioner of Chotanagpur, on the agrarian disturbances of 1886-1887, mentions that assistance was provided by missionary priests as Dr. Notrott of the German Mission Revd. J. C. Whitley, of the Anglican Mission and from the Roman Catholic missionaries in quelling the agrarian disturbances, see (Roy 1911: 285-291).

<sup>6</sup> These uprisings are indicators that the community did not accept the changing realities and resisted it tooth and nail.

became more pronounced as the Christian Mundas, who trusted Christian missionaries and believed that they would get their land back through these mechanisms reverted to fight the British in the Ulgulan. This was also evident in women becoming actively involved in the fight for their land. They acted as supporters, adherents, believers, informants, cooks, bodyguards for Birsa, preachers of Birsaism as well as Ulgulan, and fighters and became the backbone of the movement. This can be understood from the statement of Jesuit missionary, Father Hoffman, when he urges the British officials to deal with the Mundas sternly. K.S Singh (2001) mentions that Father Hoffman said that 'no leniency should be done towards Birsa's supporters and their wives and that they are stubborn'. He even demanded that the wives of the supporters of Birsa should not be allowed to leave their villages. The wives of the Mundas were actively involved in all the stages of the Ulgulan and the meetings of Birsa in villages were also arranged in the house of one supporter or the other. The villages around Dombari Buru have several anecdotes of these meetings.

Albeit oral sources richly recount these struggle their credibility is under scanner by a large group of historians. However, anthropologists consider them as essential elements of Adivasi culture. Written material although biased, especially when it comes to official reports, is considered to be more credulous. The point of intersection of the community's understanding of the event and the historical understanding might differ, and the stories might run parallel. The documentary pieces of evidence that are in the forms of official reports and which are held with suspicion by the Mundas, mention that the women of the household of absconding Munda leaders, especially the trusted lieutenants of Birsa Munda (Gaya Munda, Manjhia Munda, Donko Munda) were instigating the other women of the village, who were not active participant, to rise in Ulgulan (Singh 2001). On 9 January 1900, Mundas believe that 200 Mundas including men, women and children were killed on Dombari Buru (Tiru:1949). Even the day when Birsa was captured that is 3 February 1900, his two wives were trying to protect him. Of which one was Sali and the other was the daughter of Sugi Munda. Birsa was captured when they were sleeping (Singh 2001:157). Judicial proceedings of 1900 and home Department records mentions that women also fought bravely, and the story of the defence given by Gaya Munda and all the women of his household is well documented in the official records.<sup>7</sup> Women were given punishment by the state when a trial was conducted on the followers of Birsa. The women of the family of Gaya Munda, which includes his wife Maki Munda, two daughters-in-law, and daughters Thingi, Nagi, and Lembu were awarded rigorous imprisonment.

Women played crucial role in the movement, but their contributions were neither discussed nor appreciated. This is largely an outcome of the patriarchal mind set of the official, missionary and other record makers, in which female members are

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<sup>7</sup> Home/ Public, A, Outbreak of Mundas in the Ranchi District, August 1900, pp. 326- 353. Also See. Judicial Department Proceedings Nos. 38-46, 1895, Judicial Proceedings, No. 856-561, 4 June 1900, Judicial Proceedings, No. 870, 29 June 1900.

considered subordinate to the male members of the family and are rarely mentioned. In the Adivasi life, women are not just homemakers but also active economic partners (Shah: 2014) and a society that does not push them to the backbenches could not imagine conducting a movement without them, especially a movement that had such deep roots in the Munda world as the Ulgulan. The role of Munda women in the movement can be understood if there is a better understanding of the position of women in the Munda world.



Fig 2: Birasaites men and women offering prayer to Bhagwan Birsa on his birthday at Dombari Buru

### Women in Munda land

Women's voices are silent, generally in documenting the dissent of the community, when they are the most involved carriers of information that exist in the local cultures. Now with the turn of historical gaze, the notion of silence and voice are being increasingly debated as sites of agency within feminist research on conflict and insecurity. There is a genre of history that would like to portray them as *Viranganas* (heroines) and would try to deify them and put them into stereotypes that adhere to a specific motive and framework (Garlough 2008). This however does not represent the way women behave and are appreciated in the Adivasi societies. Adivasi women have been active economic partners in the Adivasi socio-economic order, but the societal set-up is patriarchal, though not oppressive. Their voices are counted as those of followers, and therefore they are denied respectful positions in the political order. In the village, women are engaged in tasks as sweeping and cleaning the house and cowshed, furnishing and plastering inside the house, firewood collection and carriage, cooking, cleaning utensils, clothing, making and selling of *handia* (rice beer) making of *paati* (or mats) and looking after children. In agrarian



operations, their involvement is seen in sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, thrashing by hand, winnowing, and husking of crops. They also work equally with men in tending cattle, *dauni* (or thrashing by animals), and construction of houses (Bhattacharya 1993). But certain tasks are tabooed for them like touching a plough, making *maura* (or grain storage bags) and climbing to the roof of the house for any purpose.

In Munda and Oraon Adivasi communities of Jharkhand, women are economic partners and they contribute substantially to the family income, even the bride price they get for their families is used for paying a bride price to get a wife for the brother.<sup>8</sup> Though the pressure of patriarchal institutions is not as oppressive as in caste-based societies, still the women's social position is subordinated to men. The ground realities also point to the ingrained patriarchal tendencies amongst the Adivasis. The traditional representation is still such that her role even in the religious sphere is restricted, and she has no rights of worship in the *sarna* or the sacred grove. This discrimination delineates her religious rights as well. In the absence of menfolk, even if she tries to exercise this right, it is restricted to putting vermilion on the *Sarna Maa* (sarna goddess), her right to perform sacrifice is non-existent,<sup>9</sup> as is her right of ownership of land. Although it is often observed by anthropologists (Shah 2010) that there is greater gender equality amongst the Adivasis, the fact remains that they cannot become priests or assist priests (Baigas) in the Sarna (the holy grove of sal trees) or any public offering place (Tirkey 2013 : 61-82).

In the late nineteenth century, Munda society was facing a gradual degradation due to colonial interventions and the agents and *arkatis* (persons who recruited and were watchful for finding coolies for tea gardens) were in search of the disgruntled Adivasis in weekly markets. They targeted women who were estranged or fed up with their lovers, unsatisfied with the behaviour of their husbands, unmarried girls of higher age, and others. This interference of *Dikus* (despised outsiders) was destabilising the order of the Munda society, and one objective of Birsa Dharam was to restore this order in the Munda world. In his teachings, Birsa Munda advocated one marriage and dissuaded his adherents from marrying for the second time. He emphasised simple living, giving up alcohol that was badly affecting the Munda household, and prohibited eating non-vegetarian food. To check the conversion of Mundas into Christianity, Birsa said that if a woman converts to Christianity she would not be taken back into the original faith.

Birsa comes out as a person bearing strong moral character and free from vices in Adivasi accounts, but the British officials tried to construct an image of Birsa as one who was involved with many women. This was a deliberate act of defaming him to check his popularity (Singh 2001). In 1894, Birsa selected a girl for his marriage and betrothed him as per tradition. He was arrested in 1895 and upon his release three years later from prison; he found her unfaithful and left her. Out of the two other women who wanted to marry him, one was the mistress of Kali Munda and the second was the wife of Jagga Munda of Jiuri. It is said that Birsa chided them but Jagga Munda wished that his wife should serve Birsa Munda. Another woman named Saali,

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<sup>8</sup> For more on this, see, Roy (2004) and Sachchidananda (1979).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

came to Birsa when she was already pregnant. Birsa accepted her and gave his name to the child. So, there are several stories about Birsa and the women in his life. Largely, it is experienced that the influx of outsiders were affecting the Munda social order and there was resentment in Munda society against this. The movement of Birsa therefore appealed to the women of the region.

### **The stories, the struggle and the unsung warriors**

The area of Tamar, Khunti, and Chotanagpur which is the stronghold of the Mundas has raised banners of opposition against any outside infringement of their rights since the beginning of the colonial rule. The Mundas had deep faith in their traditional system of governance led by *Mundas* and *Mankis*. The community respected their leaders and followed the decisions of their Mundas and Mankis. They would leave their home at the call of their leader and take refuge in caves. When it came to the issue of dishonouring their women, they would call meetings of many villages and raise the banner of revolt against rulers, Rajas or kings, Zamindars or landlords, and British, without thinking about the outcome or worrying about their limited numbers (Dalton 1872: 170-174). This quality is an essential element of Munda existence and it came out in a pronounced manner during the movement of Birsa.

In the first part of the Birsa movement, women were influenced by the teachings of Birsa and they became adherents of the faith preached by him. They were also attracted by the stories of him being a healer and approached him to cure the diseases of their loved ones. This phase does not find them as warriors but merely as adherents and admirers. It is only in the second phase of the movement, which began from 1899 onwards that we see them as active participants and fighters. Women were instrumental in mobilising and recruiting volunteers and spreading the ideology of the movement through word of mouth. They did this by moving from village to village. A name that finds mention in the records created by K.S Singh (2001) is of Birsa Munda's long-time companion, a Munda woman named Sali, was instrumental in mobilising the Adivasi women into this movement. However, when Birsa decided to openly oppose the British, he gave a call and approximately 7000 men and women assembled around Christmas of 1899, heralding the Ulgulan, which soon spread to Khunti, Tamar, Basia, and Ranchi district (Jamkhedkar 2016: 77). In 1899 on 26 December, when the active phase of Ulgulan had started in which fights and encounters were taking place, meetings were held in the village Jiuri. On 5th January 1900, men and women from Jiuri who were ready to carry this struggle gathered at Sail Rakab. The followers of Birsa Munda had started collecting at the mountain of Sail Rakab on 25 December 1899 and had built an entrenchment. They had brought their wives and kids along, who had firm faith in the charisma and teachings of Birsa Munda. The police party came looking for Birsa Munda, and the women of the village guided them, to enter the dry bed of the Tajna River. When the police party entered the bed it was attacked by Gaya Munda and other supporters of Birsa. Two constables were killed by the Mundas. When the Munda fighters came back to their village, women traditionally welcomed them by washing their feet and singing hunting songs (Singh 2001: 129).

On 6th January 1900 the famous incident of attack at the house of Gaya Munda of Itkadih happened. A police party surrounded the house of Gaya Munda and attacked it. At this time his entire family including sons, daughters, daughters-in-law, and grandsons were inside the house. Gaya Munda gave a tough fight and so did his wife Maki Munda. His grandson and two daughters-in-law also attacked the police party with axes and sharp weapons. His three daughters Thingi, Nagi, and Lembu attacked them with lathi, sword, and axes (Ibid: 131).

On 9th January 1900 a fight took place at the peak of Sail Rakab in Dombari Buru in Khunti, in which some Mundas were killed. A commemoration stone was erected on 9th January 2014 by the *Gram Sabha* (village council) of Gutuhatu, a village just below the legendary Dombari hills, where Birsa fought British, bravely with his supporters. It mentions 6 persons as martyrs; 3 men and 3 women. The remembrances and the record of the Mundas (Tiru 1949; Purty 1951) estimate that there were 100-200 men and women who died in this attack, fighting the armed British police. The police records also admit that women were amongst the injured and the killed and that it was difficult to distinguish between a Munda man and a woman from a distance, as they both kept long hair and dressed in one piece of cloth. These women, who knew that they were in the midst of the fight, risked their lives and family to raise the banner of Ulgulan are the unsung martyrs. Remembered in oral narratives and stories of the Adivasis but almost non-existent in the written records. On 9 January 1900, the rebels were defeated and they became the heroes of the Mundas. Birsa Munda was later captured and died in prison the same year. Nearly 350 Mundas were put on trial and three of them were hanged and 44 transported for life (Singh: 1966).

The stories of their bravery, struggle and sacrifice have become essential element of Munda Purkha Sahitya. But these records either don't carry the details of female warriors or mention their struggle in generalised tone. In the patriarchal Munda society, these women warriors were completely devoid of their individual identity and were a part of the collective identity. Women are either mentioned as wives of the husband and only his name was taken, or normally by the name of the village from where they came. This practice is so deeply ingrained in the Munda society that the basic markers of the women's identity, their names, are lost. They are either considered to be the followers of the commands of their family and even in martyrdom they are remembered as a person belonging to a particular family or a man. So, their identity appears not as individuals, but as an appendage of the husband. In Munda society women's names are not even mentioned in *Sasandiris* (sepulchral stones) (Roy: 2004). It is interesting to note that despite these traditions, identity of some of these women unsung martyrs appeared in the commemoration stones. This commemoration stone was put up on Sail Rakab on 9th January 2014. A village that is now famous as the village of the successors of Birsa Munda. The list of many martyrs who laid their lives in the struggle was prepared by the Ministry of Culture of the Government of India. This *Dictionary of Martyrs of India's Freedom Struggle (1857-1947)* was released by Prime Minister Mr.Narendra Modi, on 07 March 2019. The commemoration stone mentions these martyrs as:

Hathiram Munda of Gutuhatu

Hadi Munda of Gutuhatu

Singrai Munda of Bartoli

Wife of Bankan Munda Jiuri

Wife of Monjhia Munda, Murhu

Wife of Dungdung Munda, Murhu<sup>10</sup>



Fig 3: Commemoration Stone Dombari Buru, Khunti

<sup>10</sup> Fieldwork notes, Dombari Buru, 9 January 2022.

### **1. Maki Munda/ Wife of Gaya Munda**

Maki Munda stands as one of the rare Munda women martyrs whose name is known. She was the wife of Gaya Munda, the most trusted lieutenant of Birsa Munda, and a resident of Itkadih village. She was brave, fearless, and a strong warrior and did not hesitate to give a tough fight to the British police. Her stories of defence and defiance are available in the case of attacking the Deputy Commissioner of Itkadih.<sup>11</sup> This case was heard by Judge J.L. Platel who gave 2 years rigorous imprisonment to Maki Munda, wife of Gaya Munda; 1-year rigorous imprisonment to daughter and daughter-in-law of Gaya Munda (Singh 2011).<sup>12</sup> Maki's brave daughters Thingi, Nagi and Lembu were also unflinching in their fight and were punished for offering stiff resistance to the British authorities.<sup>13</sup> The names of the daughters-in-law of Gaya Munda are not known, yet they were given rigorous imprisonment for a year. Gaya Munda and one of his sons were hanged and the other was given life imprisonment. The brave women of the family of Gaya Munda lost their husbands and house, were imprisoned, suffered immensely at the hands of British, yet they were unflinching in their defiance (Jamkhedkar 2016: 129; Singh 2001: 45-73).

This tendency of sacrifice and resistance, without looking for iota of glory is the inherent trait of Munda women. The sheer simplicity that they practise in their life is worth a discussion in accounts of Birsaits.

### **2. Wife of Bankan Munda**

There are only a few stories and few mentions in the official records that are known about this brave woman, who was married to Bankan Munda of village Jiuri, in the Khunti district of Chotanagpur. She was influenced by the ideas of Birsa Munda, since the first phase of the movement and joined it along with her husband, who was the trusted lieutenant of Birsa (Dinkar 1990). It is mentioned in the official papers that she was killed on the Sail Rakab on 9th January 1900 and her body was found by the police. She was actively involved in the Birsa movement, between 1895 and 1900. She was killed while fighting the British police force on the Sail Rakab Hills on 9 January 1900.<sup>14</sup>

### **3. Wife of Dundung Munda**

Dundung Munda was also a resident of Jiuri village and participated in Ulgulan with his wife. She took part in the tribal uprising against the colonial rule, led by Birsa Munda, between 1895 and 1900. She was killed while fighting the British on the Sail

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<sup>11</sup> Judicial Proceedings, No. 856-561, 4 June 1900, Judicial Department, Judicial Branch; *Judicial Proceedings*, No. 870, 29 June 1900, National Archives of India.

<sup>12</sup> Judicial Proceedings, No. 856-561, 4 June 1900, Judicial Department, Judicial Branch; *Judicial Proceedings*, No. 870, 29 June 1900, National Archives of India.

<sup>13</sup> West Bengal State Archives Kolkata, Home/ Public, A, *Outbreak of Mundas in the Ranchi District*, August 1900, 326- 353.

<sup>14</sup> Home/ Public (A), *Proceedings. Nos. 326-355*, August 1900; Also see. 528/529, 1901 & 348-349, May 1901, National Archives of India; Home Department, *Proceedings. No. 352*, August 1900; Judicial Department *Proceedings. Nos. 38-46*, 1895, National Archives of India; Bengal Administrative Report, 1899-1900. Also see. P. N. Chopra (ed.), 1969, *Who's Who of Indian Martyrs*, Vols. 1-III, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.

Rakab Hills on 9 January 1900.<sup>15</sup> Her body was found in the forest behind the Dombari Buru hills.

#### 4. Wife of Monjhia Munda

The wife of Monjhia Munda was born in Badu Kumbe village of Chaibasa. She was married to Monjhia Munda of Jiuri village and became an active companion in all the work done by her husband. She gave birth to twins; a son and a daughter at a young age. These children were very small when she started actively participating in the Birsa movement. She took part in the fighting against the colonial rule, led by Birsa Munda, between 1895 and 1900. She addressed the gatherings of Mundas and was an active volunteer in spreading the movement. The family of Monjhia Munda mentions that husband and wife were active in the movement and Monjhia's wife fought bravely at the hill.<sup>16</sup> However, they believe that the British took away her son who was in her lap at the time of her death and the family has only the daughter that survives. She was killed while fighting the British police on the Sail Rakab hills on 9 January 1900.<sup>17</sup>

The reports of contemporary newspapers such as *The Bengalee*, *The Pioneer*, *The Statesman*, *The Englishman*, etc. state that the British government was upset at the killings of women and children in the incident (Sinha 1993). Therefore, it can be assumed that the number of dead persons, both men and women were deliberately kept low. The state records try to create a fabricated picture of the event and details that policemen were trying to protect women and children from being hit in this attack. This is quite contrary to the official records as we have not come across any warning given by police to women and children to vacate the hill. Nor do we come across any statement by which it may be assumed that they were given a safe passage to do so. This is quite contrary to the same record of the event that mentions, that from the forest behind the Sail Rakab, three women were found dead and a severely injured child was also lying close. If the women were not fighters then who killed them? Why were their bodies found in the forest behind the mountain? What happened to the other women and children who had shifted to the caves and were found there? Police claim that they could not distinguish between men and women due to the length of their hair, and certainly, there were fairly large numbers of women on Sail Rakab. Were their bodies thrown there after killing them on Sail Rakab? Were they killed when they were trying to escape? Why did the police party consider them dangerous? (Singh 2001). The answer to all these questions, in all probability leads to one direction they were active fighters and they engaged fearlessly with the British in protecting their land. The sad reality is that they are not

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<sup>15</sup> Home/ Public (A), Proceedings. Nos. 326-355, August 1900; Home/Public (A), Proceedings. Nos. 528-529, 1901; Home/ Public (A), Proceedings. Nos. 348-349, May 1901; Home Department, Proceedings. No. 352, August 1900; Judicial Department, Proceeding. Nos. 38-46, 1895, National Archives of India; Bengal Administrative Report, 1899-1900, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>16</sup> Fieldwork notes.

<sup>17</sup> Home/ Public (A), Proceedings Nos. 326-355, August 1900; Home/ Public (A), Proceedings Nos. 528-529, 1901; Home/ Public (A), Proceedings Nos. 348-349, May 1901; Home Department Proceedings. No. 352, August 1900 & Judicial Department Proceedings Nos. 38-46, 1895, National Archives of India; Bengal Administrative Report, 1899-1900, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

given due respect even as fighters in the state records. These records further mention that, two men, a boy, 20 women, and 8 children were found hiding in the caves.

The contribution of Maki (wife of Gaya Munda, a close associate of Birsa Munda), her three daughters Thingi, Nagi, and Lembu, and her two daughters-in-law, who carried their small babies in one hand and weapons in the other, speaks volumes about bravery of these women and that they have considered themselves strong irrespective of the age and place (Gupta and Basu 2012; Kerketta 2014). These acts of bravery, documented in the political history of the region highlights the nature of the society.

Contrary to what is the general opinion of the officials, the British officials defined Ulgulan as 'Munda disturbances', and the contemporary records mention that the investigation of the case was done poorly and the trials were also conducted with errors.<sup>18</sup> So, if we reconstruct the history of the movement based on available official records overlooking the oral literature or *Purkha Sahitya*, then the historical representation would be biased and the contribution of women warriors would not be rightly acknowledged.

### Conclusion

Between the contestations of 'self' and the 'other', 'elite' and 'subaltern', mainstream and margin, 'participants' and 'leaders'; the debate of identity consciousness neglects the silent voices of the women. The description of the movement in the contemporary period gives larger credit to Birsa Munda for its urge to create an anti-colonial hero. However, the fact remains that the Adivasi behaved as a society that believed in collective identity and resistance. Where in these occasional acts of bravery and demands for rights, the silences of women are unheard. When the simplicity of Adivasi life has been fascinating for scholars for ages, it must be considered that women's silences and voices have to be looked at and constructed within these spaces. Feminist historians are trying to reconstruct the history of women that has been left out of 'official histories'. Similarly, regional studies are trying to get back to the people in their own words, and as the women have created their own spaces and have strongly been a part of tribal connect and history, their struggles and challenges demands attention.

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<sup>18</sup> File No. Proceedings, March 1901, Nos. 528-529, Munda disturbances in the Chota Nagpur Division and the criminal prosecutions arising therefrom, National Archives of India.

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