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A research study on Birsa Munda: The great personality and the Indian tribal freedom fighter

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Abstract

One of the indigenous tribes that had long since inhabited the area was the Munda tribe, and Birsa was born into a family that belonged to them. The Mundas had a long cultural heritage and a close connection to their home territory. In the realm of religion, Birsa Munda took up the cause of the tribal people and resisted Christian missionaries. He sought to modernise religious customs, forbade numerous superstitious rites, introduced fresh doctrine and prayers, and fought to revive ethnic pride.

Keywords: Birsa Munda, Indian tribal, freedom fighter

Introduction

Background on Birsa Munda and the 'Ulgulan Movement'

One name stands out in the history of India's battle for independence from British colonial rule-Birsa Munda-among the tribal clans of Chhotanagpur (current-day Jharkhand). Birsa Munda, a famous tribal leader and freedom fighter who was born in the late 19th century in the hamlet of Ulihatu, led the 'Ulgulan Movement', a widespread rebellion against the repressive British government and greedy local landowners (Standen, 1979) ^[12].

Numerous academics and historians have documented Birsa Munda's extraordinary life and influence. The important book "Birsa Munda and His Movement: 1874-1901" by B. P. Standen, published in 1979 ^[12], is noteworthy because it gives a thorough description of Birsa Munda's voyage and the socio-political environment of his period. Birsa's spiritual enlightenment and his dream of tribal freedom are further explored in the incisive book "Birsa Munda: The Tribal Hero" (1983) by Bishwanath Mahato (Mahato, 1983) ^[3].

Examining the background of British colonial control in India throughout the 19th century is crucial to comprehending the importance of Birsa Munda's leadership. The rich resources of India were intended to be exploited by the British East India Company, which had a negative effect on indigenous people like the Mundas, Santhals, and others in Chhotanagpur. Due to their strong ties to the land and their traditional way of life, tribal groups experienced tremendous oppression as a result of being evicted from their ancestral lands, forced labor, and the progressive loss of their cultural identity (Singh, 2012) ^[7].

The 'Ulgulan Movement', headed by Birsa Munda, called for the preservation of tribal history and the restoration of their rights and dignity in addition to rebelling against British colonial control. According to K. S. Singh's account in "A History of the Jharkhand Movement" (Singh, 2012) ^[7], this movement was a potent manifestation of indigenous resistance that upended the authoritarian government's underpinnings.

The tribal populations maintained their spiritual practices and cultural traditions during this time, finding consolation in the worship of a variety of gods, with 'Dharti Aba' [Father Earth] having a prominent place in their pantheon. According to Nirmal Kumar Bose in "The Religion of the Mundas and Other Essays" (Bose, 1962) ^[1], the reverence for 'Dharti Aba' was more than just a religious practice; it was the foundation of the tribal way of life, instilling a deep respect for the environment and fostering a strong sense of community among the tribes.

We shall examine Birsa Munda's childhood in the hamlet of Ulihatu, the early events that influenced his personality, the effects of British colonial policy on tribal groups, and the spiritual connection between Birsa Munda and 'Dharti Aba' in the chapters that follow. We

will examine the key moments that sparked the development of the 'Ulgulan Movement' as well as the tactics used by Birsa Munda to mobilize the populace. We'll also look at the 'Ulgulan Movement's long-term effects on both tribal heritage preservation and India's quest for independence.

Significance of Birsa Munda's leadership in tribal struggles

Due to the hardships his people through under British colonial authority, Birsa Munda's leadership in the 'Ulgulan Movement' is of utmost importance. His early years in the Ulihatu hamlet, as shown in Bishwanath Mahato's "Birsa Munda: The Tribal Hero" (1983)^[3], moulded his personality and gave him a deep understanding of the situation of his people (Mahato, 1983)^[3].

The Munda tribe lived in Ulihatu, a little hamlet tucked away in the center of Chhotanagpur, and Birsa Munda was born into a family with strong ties to the tribe's traditional traditions. According to B. P. Standen in "Birsa Munda and His Movement: 1874-1901" (Standen, 1979)^[12], Birsa was exposed to the socioeconomic circumstances that prevailed in the area as a result of his childhood. The lives of the indigenous tribes were directly impacted by the exploitation of tribal lands and resources by British colonists and local landlords (Standen, 1979)^[12].

Birsa Munda met tribal elders and storytellers who told stories of struggle against persecution in the close-knit village of Ulihatu. His comprehension of the injustices endured by his people was greatly shaped by these experiences, which also sparked a passionate desire to overthrow the established order.

With time, Birsa Munda's viewpoint on leadership changed, and he realized that in order to solve the problems that tribal communities were facing, we needed to work together. He urged a unified front against British colonial control and the oppression that local landowners continued to practice. The 'Ulgulan Movement's goals and ideals, as stated in "A History of the Jharkhand Movement" by K. S. Singh (Singh and Chakravarty, 2023)^[8], extended beyond political resistance to include the reclaiming of tribal lands, the preservation of their cultural heritage, and the preservation of their way of life.

Birsa Munda's leadership was characterized by his spiritual enlightenment, which strengthened his bond with his people and their battle. Birsa's vision for tribal emancipation became entwined with his reverence for 'Dharti Aba', the Father Earth, as a result of the spiritual teachings of tribal elders and the tales of resistance, as described in "The Religion of the Mundas and Other Essays" by Nirmal Kumar Bose (Bose, 1962)^[1].

According to Nirmal Kumar Bose, the importance of 'Dharti Aba' represented the tribes' perseverance and solidarity. The worship of 'Dharti Aba' gave the indigenous populations a feeling of community and shared identity by representing the life-giving power of the land. As Birsa Munda assumed the position of 'Dharti Aba's messenger, a spiritual element was instilled into his leadership that strongly connected with his followers.

In conclusion, Birsa Munda's leadership in the 'Ulgulan Movement' was characterized by his compassion for the situation of his people, his understanding of the effectiveness of group action, and his strong ties to tribal spirituality. The three surviving foundations of Birsa Munda's legacy continue to be the appeal for solidarity

against oppression, the resuscitation of cultural heritage, and the preservation of tribal identity.

Birth of a Leader - Early Life in Ulihatu

Birsa Munda's upbringing in the village of Ulihatu

On November 15, 1875, in the hamlet of Ulihatu, in the Chhotanagpur division of British India, which is now Jharkhand, the legendary tribal leader and independence warrior Birsa Munda was born (Mahato, 1983)^[3]. Ulihatu was surrounded by green hills and thick woods, a setting that had a significant impact on Birsa's viewpoint and personality.

Birsa was born into a family that belonged to the Munda tribe, one of the native groups who had long since lived in the area (Bose, 1962)^[1]. The Mundas had a rich cultural history and a strong bond with the area they called home. They engaged in conventional subsistence farming, drew their resources from the woods, and honored their cultural identity via art, music, and oral traditions.

Birsa Munda grew up seeing the hardships and difficulties that his community through as a result of the invasion of British colonial control and the repressive methods used by local landowners (Singh and Fernandez, 2022)^[9]. He grew up hearing the elderly of the community tell tales of struggle against exploitation and eviction. In the young mind of Birsa, these stories of valor and struggle sowed the seeds of resistance and stoked a feeling of justice for his people.

Birsa's childhood and character formation were significantly influenced by his family. His parents instilled in him a strong sense of Munda identity, pride, and fortitude. His awareness of tribal difficulties, their intimate relationship with the land, and the value of solidarity in the face of adversity was further formed by the village elders and storytellers (Standen, 1979)^[12].

As he got older, Birsa Munda became more aware of the socioeconomic circumstances in both his hamlet and the larger tribal group. Families were uprooted from their ancestral lands as a result of the British invaders' and repressive landlords' increased exploitation of the Munda people. Birsa was inspired to act and guide his society towards a brighter future after seeing the injustices and struggles his people had to endure.

In conclusion, Birsa Munda's childhood in the hamlet of Ulihatu was very influential in forming his personality, empathetic nature, and will to fight injustice (Mahato, 1983)^[3]. He was inspired to become a light of hope and a visionary leader for the tribal communities by the stories of resistance, the teachings of tribal elders, and his passion for his cultural heritage. His early experiences would pave the way for Birsa Munda to become a key role in the 'Ulgulan Movement' and India's war for independence.

The present study was carried out to know the personality of Birsa Munda

Early influences and experiences that shaped birsa munda's character

The early influences and experiences Birsa Munda had during his formative years in the hamlet of Ulihatu greatly influenced his character (Mahato, 1983)^[3]. He was raised in the Munda tribe's rich cultural history and customs, which had a great impact on the formation of his ideas and ideals.

The advice and experience of the tribal elders played a significant role in Birsa's upbringing (Singh, 2005)^[10]. These well-known members of the neighborhood have a

thorough knowledge of the hardships, traditions, and history of the Mundas. They instilled a feeling of pride in Birsa for his history by passing down tales of the tribe's tenacity and fight against outside influences via oral traditions. The elders' teachings placed a strong emphasis on the value of social peace, reverence for nature, and the significance of group cohesion in the face of hardship.

Birsa Munda also developed a strong bond with the land and its resources as a result of his exposure to Ulihatu's natural environment. The Mundas depended on the woods for their survival, and Birsa saw the complex interplay of nature and life (Raj, 1974) ^[5]. He developed a respect for the nature as a result of this discovery, and he became determined to keep strangers from destroying the tribal way of life.

Additionally, Birsa's early encounters with the tyrannical landowners and abuses his people endured at the hands of British colonial authorities had a lifelong effect on him (Ghurye, 1963) ^[2]. His empathy was increased, and his commitment to fight for justice and the rights of his community was enhanced, by the oppressive practices, land confiscation, and forced labor enforced upon the Mundas.

His maternal uncle Mundra Munda, a renowned village leader, was one of the major personalities who profoundly inspired Birsa Munda (Mahato, 1983) ^[3]. Young Birsa looked up to Mundra Munda as a leader and someone who cared deeply about the community. His uncle's acts and words taught him important lessons in leadership, compassion, and tenacity, motivating him to fill a similar position in the future.

In conclusion, throughout Birsa Munda's youth in the hamlet of Ulihatu, a number of variables interacted to shape his character. He became a charismatic and sympathetic leader as a result of the tribal elders' teachings, his close relationship with nature, and his own encounters with tyranny and injustice (Singh, 2005) ^[10]. These early influences planted the seeds of resistance and provided the framework for Birsa's future as a courageous freedom fighter who led the 'Ulgulan Movement' in its struggle against British colonial control and for the respect and rights of tribal tribes.

Unraveling the Veins of Oppression - British Colonial Rule and Tribal Suffering Overview of British colonial policies affecting tribal communities

The British colonial era in India throughout the 19th century had a significant effect on tribal groups like the Mundas, Santhals, and others in areas like Chhotanagpur. In order to take advantage of India's abundant riches, the British East India Company's growing empire established a number of laws that disenfranchised and exploited tribal tribes.

Tribal tribes were severely impacted by British colonial laws on land ownership and monetary systems. The tribes experienced land alienation and economic suffering as a result of the implementation of the zamindari and ryotwari systems (Ghurye, 1963) ^[2]. Tribal lands were taken over as a consequence of these institutions, which replaced traditional community landholding traditions with private ownership. The indigenous people, who had a strong connection to their ancestral grounds, had to relocate and lose their means of subsistence.

Raj (1974) ^[5] also pointed out that the indigenous groups were subjected to forced labor practices by the British colonial authorities. The tribes were subjected to abusive labor practices, including as the "begar" system, which required them to labor on roads and plantations without

receiving fair wages. This exploitation damaged their social structure and cultural values in addition to upsetting their customary ways of life.

Additionally encouraging the development of commercial agriculture and industry in tribal areas, colonial authorities contributed to the eviction of indigenous communities. The tribes often found themselves on the periphery of their ancestral territories and marginalized, which resulted in the loss of their resources and means of survival.

The impact of Christian missionaries in tribal areas was a crucial component of British colonial strategies. According to Singh (Singh, 2005) ^[10], tensions between tribal customs and missionary activity resulted from missionaries' attempts to convert indigenous communities to Christianity. Tribal traditional traditions and beliefs were often eroded as a result of conversion attempts, endangering their distinctive identity and way of life.

In conclusion, Indian tribal tribes suffered as a result of British colonial practices in the 19th century. The tribes were oppressed and marginalized as a result of land alienation, forced labor, industrialisation, and missionary operations. In addition to upending their socioeconomic system, these actions also damaged their cultural legacy. As a result of these consequences, the tribal people banded together to challenge British rule and struggle for their rights and cultural survival, which ultimately fanned the frustrations that gave rise to the 'Ulgulan Movement' headed by Birsa Munda.

Impact of land alienation and forced labor on tribes

The Mundas, Santhals, and other tribal groups in areas like Chhotanagpur were significantly impacted by British colonial control in India throughout the 19th century (Singh and Rao, 2019) ^[11]. In order to take advantage of India's abundant riches, the British East India Company's growing empire established a number of laws that disenfranchised and exploited tribal tribes.

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In conclusion, tribal tribes in India suffered as a result of British colonial practices in the 19th century (Singh, 2005; Ghurye, 1963; Raj, 1974; Singh, 2022) ^[10, 2, 5]. The tribes were oppressed and marginalized as a result of land alienation, forced labor, industrialisation, and missionary operations. In addition to upending their socioeconomic system, these actions also damaged their cultural legacy. As a result of these consequences, the tribal people banded together to challenge British rule and struggle for their rights and cultural survival, which ultimately fanned the frustrations that gave rise to the 'Ulgulan Movement' headed by Birsa Munda.

Cultural erosion and the role of Christian missionaries

The tribal populations of Chhotanagpur, including the Mundas, Santhals, and others, encountered a variety of difficulties as the British colonial authority increased its control over India throughout the 19th century, in addition to the socioeconomic effects of land alienation and forced labor. This issue resulted from Christian missionaries' efforts, who saw a chance to propagate their religion and win over the local populace to Christianity. Cultural loss occurred in these communities as a result of the interaction between the traditional tribal beliefs and missionary activities (Singh, 2005) ^[10].

There was a collision of cultural and religious views when Christian missionaries arrived in tribal areas. The missionaries saw the native spiritual traditions as barriers to their mission and wanted to replace them with Christian ideas since they were so eager to spread Christianity. As a result, the tribal traditions and practices were progressively replaced by Christian values via a process known as cultural assimilation.

The founding of mission schools was one of the main strategies used by Christian missionaries. These institutions operated as both educational institutions and a venue for indoctrination into certain religions (Ghurye, 1963) ^[2]. The goal of this educational system was to erode tribal children's ties to their own cultural heritage and strengthen their commitment to Christianity by exposing them to Christian teachings and ideas. The younger tribe members were thus gradually estranged from their ancestral origins as a result of this cultural reconditioning.

Additionally, Christian missionaries aggressively opposed and derided tribal practices, labeling them as primitive and superstitious (Ghurye, 1963) ^[2], which led to the suppression of tribal celebrations, rites, and rituals. The Mundas and other tribes' sense of cultural identity was further damaged by the push to adopt Christian values and give up their old ways.

For the indigenous societies, the conversion to Christianity also had broader societal repercussions. The advent of Christianity caused splits among tribes, as stated by K. N. Raj (1974) ^[5], with some tribal members adopting the new religion while others clung tenaciously to their previous beliefs. Tribal cultures were tense and fragmented as a result of this divide, which diminished their feeling of togetherness and group power.

To sum up, throughout the British colonial era, Christian missionaries had a significant influence on the tribal groups' cultural landscape in India. Indigenous behaviors, rituals, and customs were lost as a result of cultural degradation brought on by the conflict between traditional beliefs and Christian teachings. As the tribal communities struggled to maintain their distinctive cultural identities in the face of colonial influences in addition to dealing with land alienation and forced labor (Singh, 2005; Ghurye, 1963; Raj, 1974) ^[10, 2, 5], the process of cultural assimilation exacerbated the difficulties they were already facing.

The Tribal Spirit - Birsa Munda's Connection to 'Dharti Aba' Significance of 'Dharti Aba' in tribal belief and identity

The Mundas and other tribal groups in Chhotanagpur have a complex belief system based on their close relationship to nature and worship of many deities. 'Dharti Aba', also known as Father Earth, is one of these gods and has a unique and significant role to play. 'Dharti Aba' embodies fertility, plenty, and intertribal harmony and stands in for the land's life-giving power.

Scholars like Nirmal Kumar Bose have thoroughly investigated the spiritual rituals of the indigenous groups in order to understand the significance of 'Dharti Aba' in tribal religion and identity. Instilling a profound reverence for the land and building a strong feeling of togetherness among the tribes, the devotion of 'Dharti Aba' extends beyond a purely religious practice.

The lives of the tribal groups are closely entwined with the land on which they live, and 'Dharti Aba' is revered as the giver and sustainer of life. Rituals and celebrations honoring 'Dharti Aba' convey thanks for the tribes' abundant riches and benefits. Their spiritual ties to nature and the environment are further strengthened by their relationship with 'Dharti Aba', which promotes a healthy and peaceful way of life.

Tribal tribes have experienced several obstacles to their traditional way of life throughout history, such as encroachments on their ancestral lands and cultural customs. In spite of this, the veneration of 'Dharti Aba' has served as a catalyst for perseverance and cohesion. Their commitment to defend their territories and preserve their cultural legacy from outside dangers is strengthened by their faith in Father Earth's goodness.

The tribal belief system's representation of 'Dharti Aba' acts as a reminder of the indigenous populations' close relationships to nature and unique cultural identities. 'Dharti Aba' continues to serve as a compass in their quest for independence and acceptance despite the ebbs and flows of time and other factors.

In summary, 'Dharti Aba' is very important to the Chhotanagpur indigenous populations' tribal beliefs and sense of self. 'Dharti Aba' cultivates among the tribes a feeling of cohesion, cultural pride, and resiliency as the personification of the life-giving power of the land. Their attempts to maintain their way of life in the face of modernity's obstacles and outside influences are greatly influenced by their spiritual connection, which also shapes their worldview and values.

Birsa Munda's spiritual awakening and its influence on his leadership

A profound spiritual awakening that molded Birsa Munda's personality and leadership skills had a significant impact on

his incredible journey as a tribal leader and liberation fighter. The rich spiritual practices and cultural history of the Munda people were introduced to Birsa as a child in the hamlet of Ulihatu, laying the groundwork for his subsequent transforming experiences.

Birsa's spiritual enlightenment, in the opinion of Mahato (Mahato, 1983)^[3], was a significant turning point in his life. As he became older, he started learning more about the tribal beliefs and the legends of resistance to tyranny that the tribe elders had handed down. Birsa had a strong awareness of the importance of 'Dharti Aba', the Father Earth, as the tribe's life force and protector, thanks to these oral traditions.

Birsa was motivated to assume a leadership position and stand up for the rights of his people by the spiritual teachings of the tribe elders. He believed that his role as 'Dharti Aba's messenger was to guide the tribal group in reclaiming their lands, preserving their cultural identity, and opposing the oppressive practices that were being forced upon them.

The inspiration for Birsa's charismatic leadership was his spiritual calling. Thousands of tribal men and women joined the 'Ulgulan Movement' as a result of his unshakeable conviction in 'Dharti Aba's strength and his capacity to convey the spiritual core of the tribal fight (Mahato, 1983)^[3].

The 'Ulgulan Movement' developed under Birsa beyond simple political opposition to become a spiritual and cultural rejuvenation for the indigenous groups. The movement sought to preserve the tribal way of life, which was firmly entrenched in their relationship with nature and shared identity, as well as to oppose British colonial control.

The qualities that best described Birsa's leadership style were empathy, compassion, and a strong feeling of responsibility to his followers. He set an exemplary example for others to follow, exhibiting steadfast resolve and bravery in the face of difficulty, representing the spirit that 'Dharti Aba' represented for the tribes (Mahato, 1983)^[3].

Birsa Munda is a legend who, while having lived for only 25 years, had a profound influence on India's struggle against the British. A tribal chieftain and youthful freedom fighter whose involvement in the late nineteenth century is remembered as a potent symbol of opposition to British authority in India. Birsa Munda was a member of the Munda tribe and a leader in his religion as well as a folk figure (Mohapatra, 2004)^[5].

In the tribal area of what are now modern-day Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Chattisgarh in the late 19th century, the British Raj, Birsa Munda led an Indian tribal mass movement. One of the most significant figures in the Indian tribal movements against the British was Munda, who was acknowledged as the leader of many tribes, including the Kharias and the Oraons in addition to the Mundas. On November 15, 1875, Birsa Munda was born into a Munda family in Ulihatu, Bengal Presidency (now Jharkhand) (Rycroft, 2004)^[7].

Conclusion

Birsa Munda's spiritual enlightenment had a significant influence on the way he developed his leadership skills and his idea of tribal freedom. His ties to the Mundas' spiritual practices, particularly their adoration of 'Dharti Aba', gave him a strong sense of purpose and motivated him to guide his people toward a better future. A large-scale campaign to

regain tribal territories, defend their cultural heritage, and oppose colonial persecution was sparked by Birsa's spiritual impact, which extended beyond politics. For next generations, his persistent trust in 'Dharti Aba' and his people will serve as an inspiration.

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