

- The Birsaite rebellion was preceded by a series of tribal uprisings in the Chotanagpur plateau and adjoining areas like the Kol insurrection (1830-33), Santhal rebellion (1855) among others, against — encroachment of land, labour and livelihood of tribal communities by British imperialists as well as native Indian rulers.
- The primary reason for these uprisings was the imposition of the Permanent Settlement Act (1793) which had alienated the tribal communities from the land which they cultivated.
- This introduction of zamindari had also brought the hitherto unknown practices like forced labour and several arbitrary taxes and rents levied upon the tribal peasantry.
- Coupled with this, the influx of Mahajans and Thekedars in the tribal regions, mostly belonging to the so-called upper castes, had introduced the practice of — usury in the former moralistic economy of tribal communities, causing immense economic exploitation and hardships for them

BOKTA UPRISING

- The immediate precursor of the Birsaite rebellion was the Sardari movement, whose basic philosophy was “the Adivasis were the first people to clear the lands of Chotanagpur & as such they had an inalienable rights to free access to Chotanagpur land”
- The *sardars* or leaders of the tribal communities primarily adopted a peaceful method of petitioning their grievances to several British government officials demanding the restoration of their rights over the land bypassing the dikus.
- From 1858 to 1895, the sardars repeatedly submitted petitions to the highest officials, including the Viceroy of India and even the secretary of state for India in London.
- In this ‘protest within the bounds of law’, the sardars were helped by Christian missionaries, who they identified with the British race.
- In fact, a huge segment of the tribal population adopted Christianity not to anticipate the financial rewards but as a political tactic, and also because the missionaries brought with themselves schools and new agricultural technology.
- Missionaries were helping to boost the agricultural production — which was an ultimate aim of the British govt to enhance their revenue generation
- The petitioning mode was only met with disappointment as it brought absolutely no change in the socio-economic condition of the tribal communities.

- This disappointment with the British government also changed the relationship between sardars & missionaries, as the sardars began to file court suits against the missionaries & Christian Adivasis who had appeared in court on behalf of the British.
- This movement took place in various parts of Chotanagpur.
- It aimed at regaining the tribals' ancient right on land by expelling the hated landlords.
- According to Suresh Singh, this movement evolved through three phases: (i) The Agrarian phase, (ii) the Revivalistic phase (iii) the Political phase.
- The first two phases were marked by the clashes between the landlords & tribal tenants.
- The tribal tenants revolted against the rise in rent, eviction from land and harassment of the tenants by the landlords.
- From 1890, the Sardar movement turned against all Europeans, both missionaries and officials, who were suspected to be collaborating with the landlords
- People thought that British rule was the main cause of the maladies and they could be happy only when it ended.
- When the constitutional means did not yield, the tribals became violent. They used their traditional weapons such as bows and arrows.
- In September 1892, the Sardars hatched a conspiracy to kill the contractors and German missionaries. But their plan misfired because they had no organisation to rally behind.
- The tribals looked for a new leader. This leadership was provided to them by Birsa Munda

MUNDA REBELLION

- The movement of Birsa Munda is the most popular movement of the Munda tribes of Singhbhum & Ranchi districts of the Chotanagpur region.
- This movement was also directed against the outsiders dikus - landlords, traders, merchants and government officers
- These classes were created by the British.
- Before the introduction of the British policies in the areas inhabited by Qaron and Munda, their traditional land and social systems had existed
- Their land system was known as 'Khuntkatti system'. The tribals enjoyed customary rights over their land.
- The system was marked by the absence of the class of landlords. The tribals worked on their land and paid tributes to their chiefs
- By 1874, the British replaced the traditional khuntkari system by the zamindari system.

- The introduction of zamindari system created the classes of zamindars (landlords) and ryots (tenants)
- The tribals now had to pay rent to the landlords and failure to do so resulted in their eviction from land.
- The landlords brought the peasants into the tribal lands from the adjoining areas & evicted the tribals from their land, harassed them by brute force, encroaching upon their land, enhancing their rent, changing the collective payment of rent into individual payment, forcing them to do begar, inflicting physical injury on them, extracting different kinds of allowances from them.
- Following the monetisation of economy, the tribals had to depend on cash for paying the rent and for meeting their daily needs. This made them dependent on the money-lenders.
- The money-lenders charged exorbitant interests from the tribals for the loan which they advanced to the tribals.
- The landlords, money-lenders & the govt officers collaborated with each other in exploiting the tribals.
- Tribal social system affected badly by British policies
- Tribal clan councils which provided them justice without any fees were replaced by the modern courts
- Apart from the exploitation and oppression of the Mundas caused by the outsiders and the disruption caused to their traditional social & political systems: natural calamities also worsened their conditions.
- Two famines in 1896-97 & 1890-1900 made them suffer from starvation
- The mundas held the dikus & the missionaries responsible for their miseries. So, they developed feelings of hatred against the dikus.
- They felt that their miseries could be ended only by removing the outsiders & establishing their independent raj.
- Even before the Birsa Munda revolt, the Sardar movement had turned against all Europeans, both missionaries & officials, formed a nexus with landlords.
- This movement was led by Birsa Munda.

BIRSA MUNDA

- The exact date of Birsa's birth is not certain. According to Scholars, the year 1874 or 1875 might be regarded as the year of his birth.
- He was born in a poor Munda tribal family in a house built of bamboo strips without a mud plaster or secure roofs.
- Having passed lower primary examination from the German Mission of Buzaru, he was sent to Chaibasa for 'further studies.
- His long stay at Chaibasa from 1886 to 1890 constituted the formative period of his life

- He was expelled from the School for his criticism of missionaries. His expulsion from the school was a turning point in his life
- His perception of the missionaries & the govt made him anti-missionary & anti-government.
- In 1860, his family gave up the membership of the German Mission in line with the Sardars' movement against it.
- He went to Bandgaon in 1891, where he came in contact with Anand Paure. Anand Paure was munshi to Jagmohan Singh, a zamindar of Bandgaon.
- He was well versed in rudimentary Vaishnavism and in the Hindu epic lores and enjoyed some reputation and influence
- Munda got influenced by him; he adopted, the sacred thread, wore sandal mark and advocated prohibition of cow slaughter.
- Birsa grew into a "prophet". He declared himself a god or Bhagwan. He preached his religion (ideals) among Mundas.
- The region of Chhotanagpur – lay between Bengal and Orissa had come under the influence of the Vaishnava movement launched by Chaitanya in the 16th century.
- The seemingly and relatively anti-caste and egalitarian elements of the movement had been able to make inroads among the religious beliefs and practices of the tribal communities.
- This folk Vaishnavism became a part of the socio-cultural life of tribal communities but the cosmology-theology of Adivasi communities remained the same as before
- When Birsa adopted few strains from Vaishnavism, he did not do it because it was "superior" but only because they already were a part of pre-colonial, pre-missionary Adivasi life.
- In 1893-94, Birsa participated in a local movement to protest against the takeover of village wasteland by the forest department.
- In 1895, when the sardar movement was on the decline, Birsa claimed to have seen a vision of god, and he proclaimed himself a prophet.
- Sociologist Max Weber famously theorised that 'prophets' emerge during a social crisis.
- The tribal society of the 19th century, was undergoing a massive socio-economic-cultural crisis
- Thousands of Mundas became his followers, who came to be known as Birsaites.
- He exhorted his followers to pray thrice a day, to live clean and live in love and harmony with one another and organise collective progress.
- He mobilized them against the British government, foreigners and exhorted them to be independent and establish Birsa Munda Raj.
- He died in jail on 9 January 1900.
- He criticised many archaic customs, beliefs and practices and called upon his people to remove

superstition, give up intoxication and animal sacrifice, prohibited begging and asked people to worship one god.

- The aim was to diminish the differences that existed between different Adivasi communities and bring them together; first under a single religious movement and later into a single political community.
- Friedrich Engels in his study of the German Peasant War (1594-95) has shown that religion, though largely a conservative force, can also play a revolutionary role, particularly when it articulates the discontentment of any oppressed class
- After Birsa proclaimed his new religion, people from all tribal communities gathered around him, mostly impressed by his alleged magical and healing powers.
- Birsa declared himself as the prophet-king who had come back to establish his long lost kingdom.

MOVEMENT

- The Birsa movement had the same background as the Sardar movement.
- The objective of Birsa was to attain religious and political independence for Mundas.
- He felt that this objective could be achieved by ending the oppression of the dikus and by driving the Europeans (British) out of their territory or by killing them.
- He announced the establishment of the Birsa Raj, in which nobody but only Birsa could be obeyed.
- He exhorted the Mundas not to pay rent.
- The government decided to arrest Birsa on 22 August 1895.
- Birsa was convicted along with others on 19 November 1895 on the charge of rioting.
- He was sentenced to imprisonment for two years and ordered to pay a fine of Rs. 50.
- In default of the payment of fine, he was to undergo an additional term of rigorous imprisonment for six months.
- The arrest of Birsa accentuated the anti-government bias of the movement.
- About the intensity of the 1895 riots Rev. Hoffman wrote: "Most of the aliens outside Ranchi would certainly have been massacred, had the government not moved promptly".
- Birsa announced that Mundas were the owners of the soil.
- The British deprived them of their homeland by appointing the non-tribals as the landlords.
- Birsa exhorted Mundas to stop payment of rent to the landlords, for holding land rent free and for establishing Munda's old rights on land.
- According to Rev. Hoffman, there was "absolute fanaticism and hatred of the foreigners, whether Hindus or Europeans".
- Movement was directed against those outsiders who formed the exploiting classes.

- It did not make these classes its target, which were outsiders but who belonged to the low classes, i.e. workers, artisans, weavers, carpenters, barbers, etc.
- The movement took a violent form. It broke out as scheduled on Christmas eve (24 December 1899).
- It was directed against landlords, contractors, police and government officials.
- The tribes attacked the outsiders with traditional weapons i.e. arrows and burnt their houses.
- The occasion of the movement's occurrence symbolised its hatred against Christians, Europeans and 'German missionaries
- Birsaites shouted "chop the black, chop the white Christians" Soon the movement "had become general".
- The Birsaites clashed with the timber contractors, killing one of them on 6 January 1900.
- They killed constables and attacked chaukidars on 5 January 1900. They had an encounter with the Deputy Commissioner on 6 January 1900.
- They killed a constable on 7 January 1900. Soon the government started counter-offensive
- Police arrested Birsa on 3 February 1900.
- He suffered from illness, cholera and weakness. He died of chronic dysentery on 9 January 1900. The arrested Mundas were tried in a ruthless manner — imprisoned and sentenced to death. The result of the trial weakened the Munda movement.
- The Birsa Munda movement had its impact on the government attitude towards their problems.
- The authorities felt the need to prepare the land records so that they could safeguard the tribal interests.
- The government conducted surveys and settlement operations for the tribals between 1902 and 1910 for achieving this purpose
- It decided to abolish the compulsory begar system and passed the Tenancy Act of 1903 which recognised the Mundari Khuntkatti system.
- The 'Government' also passed the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act in 1908.
- Birsa became a legend for the coming generations. His movement inspired the future social, religious and political movements of tribals.
- These movements contributed to the growth of consciousness among the tribals.
- The Birsaites of the Thursday School and Tana Bhagats played an important role during the national movement in the 1920s.
- They fought against the British. They prayed for their expulsion in the following way : "O Father Tana, pull out the enemies on the border, Pull out the witches and spirits, Pull out the British Government."
- Birsa's-name was evoked by the Indian National Congress and Forward Bloc to enlist the support of Birsaites in the national movement.

- Both Congress and Forward Bloc observed Birsa day in 1940.
- Birsa Munda's fight was not merely for the self. His revolt did not only encompass colonisers leaving the indigenous land – his fight was for self-determination, for the forests, the land, and the water of Jharkhand; where he continues to be celebrated.
- A prominent protagonist of tribal rights, an incomparable patriot in the prolonged list of names from the Chota Nagpur plateau
- The revolt led by Birsa Munda challenged and changed the social hierarchies and ushered in a new era of hope and development against the nexus of capitalism, colonialism, and casteism.

KHUNTAKATTI SYSTEM

- The Village may now be said to be the basis of the land tenure system.
- The land registers are made out on a village basis and spare land is allocated by the munda in consultation with village household heads.
- Since village boundaries have been fixed any tola formed subsequently to the Tenancy Act is always part of an existing administrative entity.
- The clan validates khuntkatti holdings in the village, in that Mundas who do not belong to the dominant

clan cannot be khuntkattidar in that particular village.

- But villagers, have the final say in the incorporation of outsiders into the village, whether as raiyat of the khuntkattidar or as caste specialists.
- The raiyati village, which called as Kadu, was under the jurisdiction of a dependent zamindar of the Maharaja.
- Its predominantly raiyati status is therefore attributable to alienation by a diku landlord.
- Birsa Munda attacked Christian missionaries but these attacks had nothing to do with safeguarding or protecting native religions.
- On the contrary, the attacks signified the emergence of a distinct identity consciousness among the Mundas
- The term religion had a very narrow meaning in tribal lands of old times, as their beliefs were far different from that of the mainland religions
- Remarkably, Birsa Munda took elements from Vaishnavism, Christianity and Mundari religion to propound his own 'religion', which at the same time was distinct from all the three.
- In this way, Birsa should be seen as an organic intellectual who initiated a social reform movement among the Adivasi communities.



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