



## Birsa Munda - The Great Hero of the Tribals

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The life history of Birsa Munda will go down in the history of the tribals as a story of emancipation of his own people, who were subjected to prolonged suppression by the Britishers. He was a visionary. He realised that the Britishers have come to this land to torture the masses and carry wealth abroad. He is reckoned as a freedom fighter who led the tribals essentially to prevent land grabbing by the non-tribals ending them up as bonded labourers in their own land. He had organised his first protest march for remission of forest dues. It was at this time the great famine of 1895 broke out. Birsa Munda presently is being worshipped as 'Bhagaban' in the newly created State of Jharkhand.

Birsa was born in the year 1874. Though lived a very short span of 25 years, he aroused the tribal mind-set and mobilised them in a little town of Chhotnagpur and was a terror for the British Rulers. True to his greatness and achievements to free the tribals, he was called 'Dharti Abba'. A visitor is overwhelmed to see



his statue erected in the steel city of Rourkela as a befitting tribute to this great tribal leader who had fulfilled his mission by compelling the Britishers for the promulgation of the Chhotnagpur Tenancy Act, 1908. This legislation being an offshoot of his struggle prohibited alienation of tribal land and also provision for restoration of the alienated land. He invoked the tribals to take pride of their ancestor's patriotism and to maintain their cultural ethos.

The tribals were suppressed for long by the Dikus (non-tribals) and the intermediaries like Thikadars and money lenders including Zamindars tried to exploit the tribals constantly. The tribals who were for centuries the owners of the land and engaged in cultivation could not stand the trials before the British Court and the primitive practice of verbal agreement on land ownership could not be recognised by law. Finally the tribals ended themselves up as bonded labourers in their own land of origin.

The level of discontentment which grew out of sustained discontentment struck at the

very root of their age-old customs and practices and against this background Birsa organised his struggle to free the tribal folk from the brink of survival and he commenced his protest march on 1st October 1894 for remission of forest dues. He gave his clarion call to the tribals in his own language '*Maharani raj tundu jana oro abua raj ete Jana*'. In other words he wanted the tribals to end the rule of the queen and re-establish their own kingdom.

Birsa accordingly spearheaded the tribal movement in the region of Chhotanagpur and brought the tribal community under a single umbrella. He instigated the masses by putting examples of their ancestors and their burning patriotism which now spread like wild fire. Birsa saw to it that a gallant struggle was to be fought reawakening patriotism among his masses, which was almost at the waning state. His organisational skill, motivating the masses to regain freedom from the power grabbers like the Thikadars, Zamindars and money-lenders and restoration of full ownership rights as tillers of the soil are exemplary in the history of the tribals.

After our Constitution coming into force a lot of safeguards have been bestowed upon the tribals to save them from exploitation from the affluent class. Many a legislations have been passed both by the Parliament and the State Legislatures to protect them from the land grabbing by the non-tribals. Their inherent indebtedness and alcoholism which continued

to be endemic, and of late considerable tribal land has been acquired for various development projects for industrial, power and irrigation purposes leading to large scale displacement and alienation of their tenancy rights. In return the little that is given to the tribals as compensation package is grossly inadequate. This has given rise to discontentment.

Birsa Munda's dream can be realised only if the tribals are restored with their land within a limited time frame by suitable enactment. It is high time that the oppression of the private money lenders should be stopped. Govt. plans such as tribal sub-plan and Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDP) and Modified Area Development Approach (MADA) should be implemented in right earnest under single window administration.

In the words of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Tribal people should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them forcibly. We should try to encourage in every way their traditional arts and culture." Then only Birsa Munda's revolt to save the tribals from the age-long repression by awakening them from the deep slumber both as a prophet and saviour can be fully realised. Birsa died Jail in 1900 at the budding age of twentyfive.

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