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**CONTRIBUTION OF BIRSA MUNDA ON SOCIAL AND POLITICAL
MOVEMENT IN INDIA: AN EVALUATIVE STUDY**

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The tribal people faced several cultural and agrarian challenges in the region of Jharkhand and Bihar. Birsa Munda, Adivasi leader (indigenous people) led a rebellion at the end of the 19th century against the dikus (outsiders) popularly known as Birsa Ulgulan (tumult, rebellion). The movement targeted British officials, zamindars and missionaries. One of the immediate effects of the Movement emerged in the form of protectionary legislation (Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act) and later played an influential role in the making of Jharkhand. In this article our main focus will be on studying and understanding the key features of the social and political movements taken by Birsa Munda. And we will also try to evaluate the contributions and steps taken by Birsa Munda to solve the problems emerging in the indigenous region.

Introduction

In 1895, a man named Birsa was seen roaming the forests and villages of Chotanagpur in Bihar. People said he had miraculous powers – he could cure all diseases and multiply grain. Birsa himself declared that God had appointed him to save his people from trouble, free them from the slavery of dikus (outsiders). Soon thousands began following Birsa, believing that he was bhagwan (God) and had come to solve all their problems. Birsa was born in a family of Mundas – a tribal group that lived in Chotanagpur. But his followers included other tribes of the region – Santhals and Oraons. All of them in different ways were unhappy with the changes they were experiencing and the problems they were facing under British rule. Their familiar ways of life seemed to be disappearing, their livelihoods were under threat, and their religion appeared to be in danger. What problems did Birsa set out to resolve? Who were the outsiders being referred to as dikus, and how did they enslave the people of the region? What was happening to the tribal people under the British? How did their lives change? These are some of the questions we will read about in this article.

Methodology

The research methods which I have used are secondary methods and tried to see the contribution of Birsa Munda in political and social movements of India and the tribal community and have compared it with contemporary Jharkhand's tribal community.

History of Jharkhand and coming of Birsa Munda

Later, during the Mughal period, the Jharkhand area was known as Kukara. After the year 1765, it came under the control of the British Empire and became formally known under its present title, "Jharkhand" - the Land of "Jungles" (forests) and "Jharis" (bushes).

The region has been inhabited since the Stone Age. Copper tools from the Chalcolithic period have been discovered. This area entered the Iron Age during the mid-2nd millennium BCE.

The region came under the control of the Maurya Empire and much later (17th century) was later conquered by the Mughal emperor Akbar. With the Mughal decline, the region came under local rulers from the Chero caste and others, before its subjugation by the British East India Company in the late 18th century, succeeded by the British Raj from the mid-19th century, both encountering much local resistance. At this time the territory was covered by nine princely states. After Baba Tilka Majhi's uprising against British rule, there were three major revolts that are deeply embedded in the tribal history of resistance. These revolts are marked by spells of tribal awakening for freedom and independence. They are the Kol Revolt in 1829-1839, the Santhal Revolt in 1855-1856, and the Munda Revolt in 1899-1900, which is also known as the Ulgulan revolution. Under the Raj, till 1905, the region fell within the Bengal Presidency, most of it then being transferred to the Central Provinces and Orissa

Tributary States; then in 1936 the whole region was assigned to the Eastern States Agency.

Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, tribal groups in different parts of the country rebelled against the changes in laws, the restrictions on their practises, the new taxes

they had to pay, and the exploitation by traders and moneylenders. The Kols rebellion in 1831-32, Santhals rose in revolt in 1855, the Bastar Rebellion in central India broke out in 1910 and the Warli Revolt in Maharashtra in 1940. The movement that Birsa led was one such movement. The reason for the coming of Birsa Munda as a folk hero was the exploitation done by the Britishers and dikus on poor tribals.

How did tribal people live?

By the nineteenth century, tribal people in different parts of India were involved in a variety of activities. Some of them practised jhum cultivation, that is, shifting cultivation. This was done on small patches of land, mostly in forests. The cultivators cut the treetops to allow sunlight to reach the ground, and burnt the vegetation on the land to clear it for cultivation. They spread the ash from the firing, which contained potash, to fertilise the soil. They used the axe to cut trees and the hoe to scratch the soil in order to prepare it for cultivation.

In many regions tribal groups lived by hunting animals and gathering forest produce. They saw forests as essential for survival. The Khonds were such a community living in the forests of Orissa. Many tribal groups lived by herding and rearing animals. They were pastoralists who moved with their herds of cattle or sheep according to the seasons. Some took to settling cultivation. Even before the nineteenth century, many from within the tribal groups had begun settling down, and cultivating their fields in one place year after year, instead of moving from place to place. They began to use the plough, and gradually got rights over the land they lived on. In many cases, like the Mundas of Chota Nagpur, the land belonged to the clan as a whole

How did colonial rule affect tribal lives?

Major challenges:

The lives of tribal groups changed during British rule. Before the arrival of the British, in many areas, the tribal chiefs were important people. They enjoyed a certain amount of economic power and had the right to administer and control their territories. In some places they had their own police and decided on the local rules of land and forest management. Under British rule, the functions and powers of the tribal chiefs changed considerably. They were allowed to keep their land

titles over a cluster of villages and rent out lands, but they lost much of their administrative power and were forced to follow laws made by British officials in

India. They also had to pay tribute to the British, and discipline the tribal groups on behalf of the British. They lost the authority they had earlier enjoyed amongst their people, and were unable to fulfil their traditional functions.

The British wanted the tribals to settle in one place so that it would be easier for them to control us. They introduced land settlements for a regular supply of revenue.

Forests were a source of livelihood for the tribals, and so the forest laws formulated by the British had a significant impact on their lives. The British declared all forests as state property and classified certain forests as reserved and the tribals weren't allowed to cultivate, hunt or gather fruits in these areas.

This forced many of the tribals to move to other places in search of livelihood and created a scarcity of labourers for the British.

Some tribals were allocated small patches of land near the forest for cultivation, and in return asked to work for the British. The tribals eventually protested against these laws. The revolt of Songram Sangma in Assam in 1906 and the forest Satyagraha in the Central Provinces in 1930 were two such major revolts against the British.

It also affected the lives of tribals greatly as they were exploited by moneylenders and traders. By the 19th century, many traders and moneylenders started coming to the forests for purchasing forest produce, offering loans and obtaining cheap labour.

The 19th century saw many tea plantations and mines coming up in different parts of India. Since the forests were now under the British, many tribes were forced to leave their homes and work in these plantations and coal mines.

About Birsa Munda

Birsa was born in the mid-1870s. The son of a poor father, he grew up around the forests of Bohonda, grazing sheep, playing the flute, and dancing in the local akhara. Forced by poverty, his father had to move from place to place looking for work. As an adolescent, Birsa heard tales of the Munda uprisings of the past and saw the sirdars (leaders) of the community urging the people to revolt. They talked of a golden age when the Mundas had been free of the oppression of dikus, and said there would be a time when the ancestral right of the community would be restored. They saw themselves as the descendants of the original settlers of the region, fighting for their land (mulk ki larai), reminding people of the need to win back their kingdom.

His education life

Birsa went to the local missionary school, and listened to the sermons of missionaries. There too he heard it said that it was possible for the Mundas to attain the Kingdom of Heaven, and regain their lost rights. This would be possible if they became good Christians and gave up their “bad practices”. Later Birsa also spent some time in the company of a prominent Vaishnav preacher. He wore the sacred thread, and began to value the importance of purity and piety. Birsa was deeply influenced by many of the ideas he came in touch with in his growing-up years. His movement was aimed at reforming tribal society. He urged the Mundas to give up drinking liquor, clean their village, and stop believing in witchcraft and sorcery. But we must remember that Birsa also turned against missionaries and Hindu landlords. He saw them as outside forces that were ruining the Munda way of life.

His contributions

Birsa Munda belonged to the Munda tribe of the Chota Nagpur Plateau area. He spent his childhood surrounded by Christian missionaries, whose main mission was to convert as many tribal people into Christians as possible. Munda went to a missionary school, where his teacher Jaipal Nag encouraged his sharp young pupil to study further and enrol in the German Mission School. For this, he was forced to convert to Christianity.

Birsa Munda is also known as 'Father of the Earth'. Between 1886 and 1890, Munda spent a lot of time in Chaibasa, Jharkhand, which was close to the Sardars'

agitation against British rule. Deeply influenced and disillusioned by what he saw the British and the Christian missionaries do to the Indians there, Munda decided to renounce Christianity and drop out of the German Mission School.

His social movement:

He went on to create a new religion called **Birsaits**, which **worshiped only one god**. Given his growing influence in the tribal community, **Birsaits** soon became the popular religion among the Mundas and Oraons. Nicknamed '**Dharti Abba**' or Father of the Earth, Munda encouraged his followers to get back to their tribal roots and follow their traditions.

Through his religion, Munda also preached a strong anti-British sentiment and mobilised thousands of tribal folk to form guerrilla armies to attack the Raj. In the late 1890s, Munda set out to abolish the feudal system that the British had introduced in the Adivasi forest land. In this system, the British invited migrants from other states to come and take over work on tribal land, while they pocketed all the profits. Thus, the various tribes, who were the original owners of the land, were left bereft of land and any means of livelihood.

Political Movements

Munda rebellion - This rebellion was led by Birsa Munda in the south of Ranchi in the year 1899 against land alienation. The **“Great Tumult”** aimed to establish Munda Raj and independence. Traditionally, the Mundas enjoyed a preferential rent rate known as the **Khunt Katti Dar**, which meant the original clearer of the forest. However, in course of time, the Mundas realised that this system of khuntkattidar was being corroded by the jagirdars and thikadars who came as moneylenders and as traders. After the establishment of British rule, the movement into the tribal regions by the non-tribals increased. This, in turn, led to an increase in the practice of forced labour. The tribal people became more aware of their rights due to the spread of education, which was provided by the missionaries. The social cleavage between the Christian and non-Christian Mundas deepened due to which the solidarity of the tribals got diluted. Therefore, there were two reasons for the revitalization of the movement, one was agrarian discontent and the other was the advent of Christianity. The movement aimed to reconstruct the tribal society from disintegration, which was staring in its face due to the stress and strains of colonial rule.

The birth Of Ulgulan - A leader is not born; circumstances, the environment, necessities, education, and self-realisation to take the lead make a person a leader. Birsa Munda started a movement called **‘Ulgulan’**, which means ‘revolution’ in the Mundari language spoken by the Munda tribe. The fight was for the right to their lands. His leadership was phenomenal, and thousands of tribals stood with him. The uprising posed a threat to the British government. For a long time, they couldn’t capture this god-like man.

In 1895 Birsa urged his followers to recover their glorious past. He talked of a golden age in the past – a satyug (the age of truth) – when Mundas lived a good life, constructed embankments, tapped natural springs, planted trees and orchards, practised cultivation to earn their living. They did not kill their brethren and relatives. They lived honestly. Birsa also wanted people to once again work on their land, settle down and cultivate their fields. What worried British officials most was the political aim of the Birsa movement, for it wanted to drive out missionaries, moneylenders, Hindu landlords, and the government and set up a Munda Raj with Birsa at its head. The movement identified all these forces as the cause of the misery the Mundas were suffering.

The land policies of the British were destroying their traditional land system, Hindu landlords and moneylenders were taking over their land, and missionaries were criticising their traditional culture. As the movement spread the British officials decided to act. They arrested Birsa in 1895, convicted him on charges of rioting and jailed him for two years. When Birsa was released in 1897 he began touring the villages to gather support. He used traditional symbols and language to rouse people, urging them to destroy “Ravana” (dikus and the Europeans) and establish a kingdom under his leadership. Birsa’s followers began targeting the symbols of diku and European power. They attacked police stations and churches, and raided the property of moneylenders and zamindars. They raised the white flag as a symbol of Birsa Raj.

He was, however, arrested by the British police on March 3, 1900, in the Jamkopai forest in Chakradharpur and was put in jail in Ranchi. He died of Cholera on June 9, 1900, at a young age of 25, at least that is what was declared by the British government. The tribals, however, believed that the officials in jail killed him. As a result, even after his death, the impact of the movement remained very strong, forcing the British government to pass the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act in 1908. The Act restricts the passing on of land from tribal people to non-tribals.

Conclusion

India belongs to the tribals. The UNO admits it as well. The first invaders were the Aryans; the second were the Mughals, and the last were the British. Tribals never welcomed invaders nor accepted slavery. The Mughals and the Brahmans welcomed the East India Company, and that is how the door was opened to

British rule in India for over 200 years. The scenario changed when the uprising of the tribals began.

Birsa Munda was a young freedom fighter and a tribal leader, whose spirit of activism in the late nineteenth century, is remembered to be a strong mark of protest against British rule in India. Born and raised in the tribal belt around Bihar and Jharkhand, Birsa Munda's achievements are known to be even more remarkable by virtue of the fact that he came to acquire them before he was 25. In recognition of his impact on the national movement, the state of Jharkhand was created on his birth anniversary in 2000.

He belonged to the Munda tribe in the Chota Nagpur Plateau area. He received his early education at Salga under the guidance of his teacher Jaipal Nag. On the recommendation of Jaipal Nag, Birsa converted to Christianity in order to join the German Mission school. He, however, opted out of the school after a few years. Birsa started the faith of 'Birsait'. Soon members of the Munda and Oraon community started joining the Birsait sect and it turned into a challenge to British conversion activities.

Birsa started the faith of 'Birsait'. Soon members of the Munda and Oraon community started joining the Birsait sect and it turned into a challenge to British conversion activities. The reason for the starting of Birsait movement was because he wanted to save the culture of the tribal people which the missionaries wanted to end. He also practised the Munda Rebellion for the attaining political rights of the tribal people. He stood for the cultural rights, religious right, political right, social rights, protection of land and forest and he also worked for the welfare of the poor tribal people.

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But still, if we compare the present scenario of Birsa's movement then we will find that Bhagwan Birsa Munda is needed again to save the tribals. As we all know Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act restricts the passing on of land from tribal people to non-tribals but The Land Acquisition Act 1894, which undermines the CNT Act, 1908, and facilitates easy loot of tribal land.

In the name of development and public service, dams, factories, roads and railways, and canals have been built in Jharkhand, taking away the land of over 90% of the tribals. Cities like Jamshedpur and Ranchi have come up on grabbed tribal land that was grabbed. If the CNT Act has been protecting tribal land since 1908, how come non-tribals have successfully built their homes in the region? How come so many mines and industries have come into operation on indigenous land? It isn't my job to answer these questions; it is the government's.

Land grabbers and invaders will stop at nothing to do what they came for. In 1907, the year before the CNT Act was passed, the Tata Group had already acquired the land of tribals for mining iron ore in Noamundi and Jamshedpur for establishment of its industrial empire. Jamshedpur at one time was known as 'Kalimati' (the land of black soil) and was home to the Munda, Santhal and Ho tribes, who were forcefully displaced by the dikus (non-tribals) to acquire the land. The non-tribal government tried many times to amend the Act, and, eventually, the Raghubar Das government weakened the Act. The government, through the amendment to Section 49, will now be able to acquire land in the Chota Nagpur region without any difficulty. Therefore we can say that at present there is the end of Colonial rule of Britishers and the dikus but in the contemporary world the government is acting as the British Colony and the nontribals are acting as the dikus in the tribal region of Jharkhand and are trying to take away all the natural goods and properties of aboriginal and trying to affect the culture of tribal people we can take the example of some of the political parties such as BJP which keeps on telling in most of its speeches that aboriginals of Jharkhand who follow sarnaism are Hindus therefore we can see that at present there is politicisation of religion and caste in the region of Jharkhand and several lands and forests are being exploited by construction of factories, dams, practising mining, in several areas exploitation of minerals, cutting of trees and looting of tribal lands etc. Hence all these practices should stop and the interests of tribal people should be saved.

People and the government in power should understand that great power should be handled with great responsibility and humility. But what we are seeing is that with more power, there is more cruelty — a destructive superiority complex, arrogance and dictatorship. If this is how the government continues to treat the tribals and the speed at which the natural wealth and social culture are being exploited, the tribals will not be saved, and India will never progress to its full potential.

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