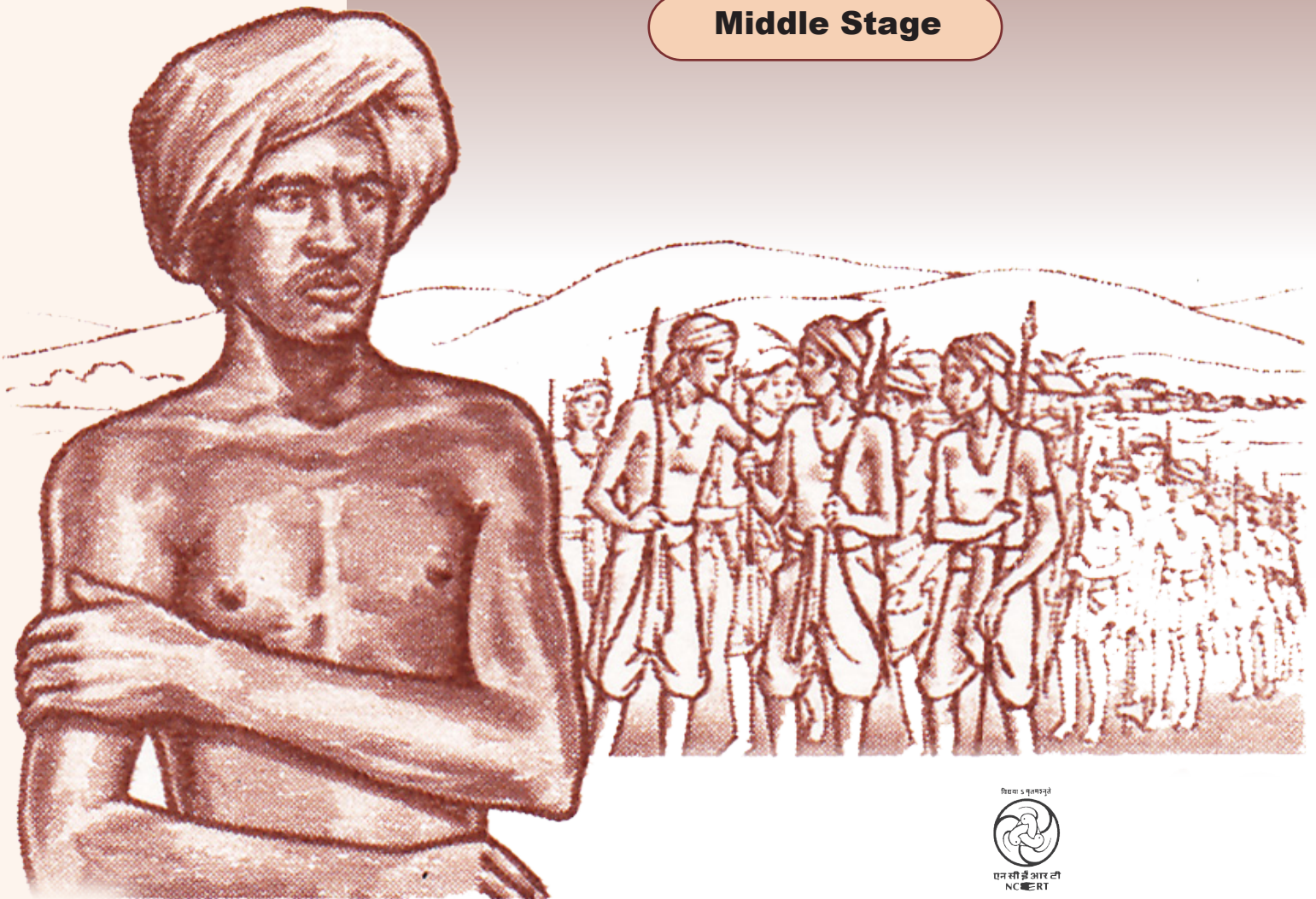


The Legend of Birsa Munda:

A Saga of Courage and Sacrifice

Middle Stage



© Wikimedia Commons: Birsa Munda 1988 stamp of India



राष्ट्रीय शैक्षिक अनुसंधान और प्रशिक्षण परिषद्
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING

1.0

The Legend of Birsa Munda: A Saga of Courage and Sacrifice



“We know that even before the 1857 freedom struggle, there was a tribal youth in our country who had given a tough fight to the Britisher. At the age of 20-22, he had given a tough fight to the Britisher, whom we worship today as ‘Bhagwan Birsa Munda’. The 150th birth anniversary of Lord Birsa Munda is coming, may it be a source of inspiration for all of us. Who can be a bigger inspiration than Bhagwan Birsa Munda for the passion that even a small person has for the society and country! Come, let us celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of Bhagwan Birsa Munda, let the level of sensitivity and compassion increase amongst us, let us develop a sense of affection towards society, let us take along with us every member of society, the poors, the Dalits, the backwards, the tribals, everyone; we have to move ahead with this resolution.”

– **Shri Narendra Modi**

Hon'ble Prime Minister of India



OVERVIEW:

India's struggle for independence is embossed with the contributions made by the known and the lesser-known freedom fighters, who contributed their might in achieving freedom from the colonial yoke. In this historic movement of great significance, the leadership arose from different corners of the country. Persons who became leaders in due course of time rose from diverse and humble backgrounds. They succeeded in mobilizing the common people including the indigenous tribal communities from different regions. The leader and the led became the legend makers of their times, and also for all other times to come. Their commitment and courage have left deep impression on the sand of time and have become inspirational and a source of motivation to youth and all. In



the present write-up the efforts and sacrifices made by Birsa Munda in leading the tribal rebellion in the region of Chhotanagpur, against the British administration is discussed. He also known as Dharti Aaba (Father of Land). His selfless efforts have made the people venerate him as “*Bhagwan*” God. Infact, he has become a living example of courage and sacrifice in the popular narrative of the people of Jharkhand in their folk lore and traditions. As a mark of his heroic courage and deed in 2021, the Government of India declared November 15, the birth anniversary of Birsa Munda as “*Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas*”, Tribal Pride Day. Infact, this day corresponds with the formation of the state of Jharkhand..

OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of the module are to:

- » Promote knowledge of the life and works of Birsa Munda.
- » Express creatively the life and contribution of Birsa Munda.
- » Discuss the importance of tribal revolts as part of local history.
- » Encourage to conduct research on the reason of Munda led Tribal Revolt.

INTRODUCTION:

“We should never forget our original tribal culture”

– Birsa Munda

Monu and Meena began discussing on how they should celebrate the *Janjatiya Gourav Diwas* that is to be organized in their school on the coming November 15. Both of them decided to share write up reflecting on the life, time and contributions of Birsa Munda. Both of them jointly discussed and Monu volunteered to write on the biographical account of Birsa Munda and Meena said she would focus on the Munda Tribal Revolt.

After writing a brief biography Monu shared the write up with Meena and their other classmates. He began his write up by giving the following account:

Friends did you know that Birsa Munda belonged to the Munda tribe of the Chhotanagpur plateau area, present day Jharkhand. He was charismatic leader who wanted to restore the cultural and land rights of the tribal community. He was born in 1875, in a remote village named Ulihatu of the Kunti district of Jharkhand.

Some interesting facts you would like to know

Birsa’s Birth ceremony was performed at Chalkad. Can you also find out about birth ceremony among other tribals.



Moving further, he added that Birsa's parents came from a humble background. His father Sugna Munda due to poverty left Ulihatu for Kurumbda near Birabanki to earn livelihood as *sajhadar* (sharecropper). He received his earlier education in Salga under Jaipal Nag's guidance in reading writing and arithmetic (three R's). He also went to the local missionary school. At the age of sixteen he was admitted to BEL school at Chaibasa, where he spent about four years.

In his initial years of life his father Sugna Munda had converted to Christianity and so after his birth his name was Daud Munda.

Relatable interesting details.

You know like us, he was very creative. He played flute, tuila (one-stringed instrument made from the pumpkin) and was good dancer. Very often he took part in akhra village dancing ground.

SOME EARLY INFLUENCES

Now I will share very briefly the early influences on Birsa Munda. He was influenced by Christianity because his own father Sugna Munda had converted to this faith. During his school days he came in contact with German missionaries however, he was disillusioned with them. He was expelled from the missionaries boarding school. This incident led Birsa to leave Chaibasa in 1890. He was also influenced by Vaishnavism in the company of Anand Panre, a munshi of Bandgaon zamindar. Later he founded a new sect known as the Birsait and he was called Bhagwan by his followers.

Now I will share with you another important episode of his life

DISSATISFACTION WITH COLONIAL RULE

The colonial land revenue system for example the zamindari system had created a new class of intermediaries *thikadars*, persons who exploited the tribals by taxation, cash payment, excise control, forest regulation and other levies that led to the destruction of traditional land tenure system. This phenomenon had led to the destruction of commonly owned tribal land. Infact, the zamindari policies led to both begari or forced labour.

In this regard, Birsa Munda raised his voice with his fellow beings against these exploitative policies. Did you know that he observed that the revenue settlement particularly had reduced the tribals from owners of their lands to landless labourers. It replaced the Mundari Khuntkatti system (customary institution of land ownership among Munda tribes) that had earlier made the entire community the owners of the forest land. Infact, the colonial economic policies had reduced the tribals to Bandhua Majdoor i.e. forced bonded labourers to work under inhuman trying conditions. This



became a source of deep-rooted discontentment among the tribal's. In order to make the tribals aware about their pathetic conditions, Birsa Munda started educating the tribal's about British atrocities and made them aware about their culture and heritage with regard to community ownership of land.

Let me now share some of his initiatives that are relevant in the contemporary time.

He took up campaign against alcoholism, and belief in spirit and black magic that was prevalent among some of the tribal communities including the Munda's. He also promoted among people awareness about cleanliness.

Now let's relate the life, time and contribution of Birsa Munda with the National Education Policy 2020.

Lets recall that the National Education Policy 2020 focuses on inculcating among children the pride of being an Indian rooted in the country's ethos of culture and heritage. In this very context, the life and contributions of Birsa Munda is important. It will inspire children to understand how local histories are important in knowing the causative factors of protested movements led by common people like the tribal's that became part of the freedom struggle of India. It will make us appreciate the importance of local leaders in mobilizing the tribal community for empowerment of their right and dignity. It will also help us all to internalise human value like team work, spirit of service, justice and respect the selfhood of persons belonging to different socially economically disadvantaged groups.

ACTIVITIES:

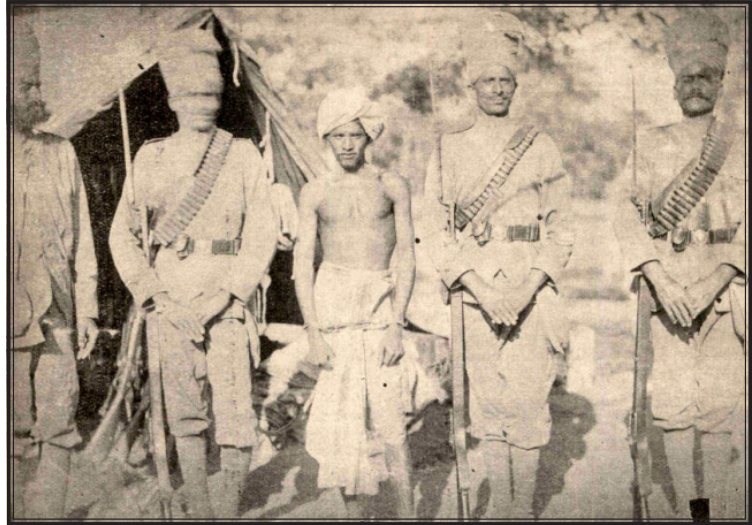
- » You may prepare quiz items on Birsa Munda.
- » Field visit may be planned to Birsa Munda Museum in Ranchi.
- » Creative writing may be encouraged on lives and times of Birsa Munda in form of essays, poems, songs and stories.
- » Collection of folklores on Munda life and livelihood can be taken up as a project work.

Monu told Meena to narrate what she has written about the causes of Munda rebellion. Meena began her narrative by giving a vivid description of the genesis of Munda Rebellion.

She began by mentioning that young Birsa in his growing yearshad heard many tales related with regard to Munda uprising of the past. He had heard from the people especially the elders urging the people to raise their voices against exploitation by the Dikus who comprised of the *thikadars* the term that you have already come



across. These alien persons were not familiar with tribal economy and land tenure system. Further, the elders of the community had very often talked about a golden age that was free from oppression of the Dikus (outsiders), and restoral of their erstwhile ancestral rights on.



© Wikimedia Commons: Birsa Munda captured and conducted to Ranchi

Therefore, she elaborated that the root cause of the Munda rebellion also known as the “Ulgulan, or the great “Tumult” movement lay in a sharp response to the land encroachment and forced labour policy of the British Raj. Birsa Munda provided leadership to this movement of discontent and mobilized tribes belonging to Chhotanagpur, Bengal and Odisha against the Dikus from 1895 onwards to establish an independent Munda Raj. The tribal communities belonging to Oraons and Kharias were roped into a common platform against the *thikadars* alliance. In this regard a flag was also conceptualised as a symbol of independence.

The methodology adopted by him was to fight the colonial exploiters by using the guerrilla warfare technique to attack symbols of power like the police station, government buildings and so on. Series of attacks were launched on churches, police station and other structures that were administered by the Dikus and the British authority. The revolt mainly concentrated in the Munda belt of Khunti, Tamar, Sarwada and Bandgaon.

In 1895 the British arrested Birsa Munda. He was charged for rioting and was subsequently jailed him for two years. On his release in 1897, he continued his activities of moving from village to village gathering support to establish a kingdom under his leadership by destroying the Dikus and the Europeans whom he called as *Ravanas*.

Birsa Munda’s slogan that threatened the British Raj was - “*Abua Raj Setarjana, Maharani Raj Tundujana*”. (Let the kingdom of the queen be ended and our kingdom be established.) Birsa Munda died of cholera in the year 1900.



ACTIVITIES:

- » You may ask children to prepare a map of India locating the places associated with the lives and works of Birsa Munda
- » Children may be asked to prepare a script on the causes and consequences of the Munda rebellion for preparing a drama item for their Annual function
- » An exhibition can be organised on life and work of Birsa Munda.
- » Discussion can be initiated in the classroom on continuity and change in the livelihoods of the tribal communities, especially with regard to the Mundas.

After completing her version of the causes Munda Rebellion both Monu and Meena summarized the write ups on Life, Time and Contribution of Brisa Munda. They together shared the concluding remarks with their classmates.



© Wikimedia Commons: :Birsa-Munda-Biography.jpg|Birsa-Munda-Biography



CONCLUDING REMARKS:

According to them, the Munda rebellion spear headed by Birsa Munda lost its vigour after his death. However, his courage in mobilizing the tribals against all forms of atrocities has made him the role model for youth as well as for all others. His contributions have raised him to the status of God, or the one to be venerated upon. After eight years of his death in 1908, the colonial government introduced the Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act (CAN). This law prohibits the transfer of tribal land to non-tribal people and protects their ownership rights over land.

Therefore, recognising his contributions for the betterment of the tribal community, especially the Mundas many institutions are named after him. Few of them are the Birsa Agricultural University, Birsa Institute of Technology, Birsa College Khunti and so on. In 2004, Ashok Saran made a Hindi film “Ulgulan - Ek Kranti.” Similarly in 2008, Iqbal Saran made another film “Gandhi Se Pehle Gandhi.” Also, Mahasweta Devi wrote a novel “Aranyer Adhikar”, on the life of Birsa Munda and his role in leading a powerful people’s movement against the British government.

For commemorating his achievements, one hundred and fifty feet tall statue has been constructed showcasing his persona in Jharkhand in 2016.

We hope that our write up will inspire all of you to creatively pen your thoughts in form of poem, short stories, essays on this great tribal personality or any other. You may also like to prepare sketches and drawings on him. All our work will be collectively shared with our teachers for being placed in school magazine or organizing classroom discussing.



Mann Ki Baat

In the monthly radio program ‘Mann Ki Baat’, Birsa Munda’s contributions to the country was acknowledge. Hon’ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi said that ‘Bhagwan Birsa Munda’ fought to protect nature, forests and land. He is also known as ‘Dharti Aaba’. Do you know what it means? It means ‘Father of the Earth’.



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