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Q4(b)

Write an essay on the life history of tribal activist and freedom fighter Birsa Munda. What was the impact of his sacrifice on tribal society?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Anthropology GS 2 · 15 marks · Impact of Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity on Indian society.

3.4 Impact of Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity on Indian society.

Core demand of the question

- **Narrate Birsa Munda's life:** birth, millenarian and political phases, **Ulgulan**, death
- State colonial land-forest-mission context (Chotanagpur, diku, beth begari)
- Assess impact of his sacrifice on tribal society and later adivasi politics
- Keep it historical and anthropological, not hagiographic only

Revision summary

Birsa Munda (1875-1900) led a Munda revitalisation and agrarian revolt, the **Ulgulan**.

He preached a purified Munda faith against diku landlords, forced labour and colonial power.

He died in Ranchi jail in 1900 after capture.

The **Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908**, and later Jharkhand politics are part of his impact.

His martyrdom is a living language of land rights; dispossession has not automatically ended.

Introduction

Birsa Munda (1875-1900) was a Munda prophet and political leader of Chotanagpur whose **Ulgulan** (great tumult) joined agrarian rights to a new religious community. His death in British custody made him a lasting symbol of tribal self-respect. Anthropology reads him with **S. C. Roy**, not only with later statues.

Body

Life history

Birsa was born at **Ulihatu** (present-day Khunti district, Jharkhand) in a Munda khuntkatti world already stressed by **diku** landlords, moneylenders, and the colonial state. He encountered missionary schooling (German mission circuits), Vaishnava and popular Hindu practice, and Munda singbonga religion. In the 1890s he emerged as **Birsa Bhagwan**, preaching a purified Munda faith: one God, ethical conduct, rejection of beth begari (forced labour), and recovery of land.

Followers, the **Birsaites** community, practised distinctive marks and gatherings. The movement was **millenarian** in **Anthony Wallace's sense of a revitalisation movement: a new sacred order to restore a broken world. It was also a political revolt.** In 1899-1900 the **Ulgulan** attacked symbols of diku and colonial power in the Ranchi-Khunti-Chakradharpur

belt. Troops suppressed it. Birsa was captured in 1900 and died in Ranchi jail in June 1900; official accounts said cholera. He was about twenty-five.

S. C. Roy documented Munda custom and the khuntkatti constitution that Birsa defended: original lineage rights in land against later zamindari and forest contractors. The **Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908** followed in the wake of this and earlier sardari agitations, restricting tribal land transfer - a legal monument to the revolt, even if the Act was also a colonial device to pacify.

Context

Forest reservation, beth begari, missionary-sardar competition, and famine-era debt produced the crisis. **Elwin** later placed such rebellions in a wider aboriginal resistance. **K. S. Singh** (Birsa Munda and His Movement) remains the standard historical anthropology: Birsa fused **religion, ethnicity and agrarian programme**. He was not a Congress nationalist in the later sense, nor a simple "Hindu reformer". He was a **tribal modern** who used prophecy to organise.

Impact of his sacrifice

- **Immediate impact was military defeat and martyrdom. Medium-term impact was legal: CNTA 1908** and a stronger Munda political identity. Long-term impact is **civilisational memory**. Jharkhand's statehood movement, the **Jharkhand Party** and later **JMM**, used Birsa as ancestor. **15 November**, his birth anniversary, is **Janajati Gaurav Divas**. The new Parliament building's name-politics and the **Birsa Munda** airport and university show the republic claiming him.

Among Mundas and other Adivasis, Birsaites continue. His sacrifice taught that **land and faith are one struggle**, which **Vidyarthi's** nature-man-spirit and later **Xaxa** both recognise. It also taught a danger: **the state can honour a dead rebel while still leasing the same plateau to mines. Impact on tribal society is therefore identity, law, and an unfinished land question**. Women in the **Ulgulan** and in later memory are less documented; a critical essay should say so.

Birsa's death did not end dispossession. It created a **language of rights** that PESA, FRA and anti-mining Gram Sabhas still speak.

Flow diagram

Khuntkatti crisis -> Birsa Bhagwan
 Birsa Bhagwan -> Ulgulan 1899-1900
 Ulgulan 1899-1900 -> CNTA 1908
 Ulgulan 1899-1900 -> Martyr memory Jharkhand

Conclusion

Birsa Munda lived a short life as prophet and organiser of the **Ulgulan**. His death made Munda land rights a public Indian fact. The CNTA, Jharkhand politics and national commemoration are his institutional afterlife. The measure of the sacrifice is whether jal, jungle and jameen are actually secure, not only whether his statue is tall.

Facts & figures

Ulihatu

Birsa's birthplace in the Munda heartland of present Khunti, Jharkhand.

Ulgulan

The 1899-1900 Munda rising under Birsa, suppressed by British forces.

CNTA 1908

Chotanagpur Tenancy Act restricting transfer of tribal land, shaped by the agrarian revolts of the region.

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