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Causes And Consequences Of Tribal Uprising In Colonial Eastern India With Special Reference To The Munda Revolt

Indrajit Mahanta[1], Dr. Anita Singh[2]

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, Km. Mayawati Govt. Girls P.G. College, Badalpur,Gautam Budhha Nagar (C.C.S University ,Meerut).

Professor, Department of History, Km. Mayawati Govt. Girls P.G. College, Badalpur,Gautam Buddha Nagar(C.C.S University,Meerut).

Abstract:

The 18th and 19th-century colonization in Eastern India changed the socio-economic, cultural, and political lifestyle in the tribal society. Numerous tribal rebellions like- Chuar rebellion, Kol rebellion, Santhal rebellion, Munda Revolt etc. are a result of the imposition of alien land revenue systems, forest rights restriction, and exploitation by landlords, moneylenders, and traders (dikus). One of these was the Munda Revolt (1899-1900), or Ulgulan, which was an exceptional socio-religious revival and political mobilisation overseen by Birsa Munda. This Paper will investigate the reasons and the outcomes of tribal rebellion in Colonial Eastern India especially the Munda Revolt. It studies the impact of economic exploitation, cultural oppression and political marginalisation in the rebellion and the effect of the rebellion on colonial policy, tribal identity and other political movements which came later. Based on a historical-analytical technique, the research relies on contemporary literature, primary sources, and secondary literature done on the revolt to determine the long-term relevance of the revolt.

Aim of the Research:

- To study the historical background that gave rise to tribal uprisings in colonial Eastern India.
- To explore the immediate triggers as well as the deeper structural causes behind the Munda Revolt (1899–1900).
- To understand the socio-economic, cultural, and political aspects of tribal resistance under colonial rule.
- To assess how colonial exploitation and administrative policies shaped tribal discontent.
- To evaluate the impact of the Munda Revolt both on tribal society and on the policies of the colonial government.

Objectives :

1. To investigate the key reasons behind tribal uprisings, with emphasis on the Munda Revolt—highlighting issues such as land dispossession, economic hardship, indebtedness, missionary influence, and colonial administrative measures.
2. To assess the leadership of Birsa Munda and the ideological significance of the Ulgulan.
3. To explore the short-term and long-term consequences of the revolt on tribal life, colonial policies and nationalist struggle.
4.

Keywords:

Tribal Uprising, Colonial India, Munda Revolt, Birsa Munda, Eastern India, Land Alienation, Chotanagpur, Ulgulan etc.

Introduction:

The history of colonial India is marked not only by the growth of British authority and economic exploitation but also by the resistance movements of diverse communities who sought to defend their social, cultural, and economic rights. Among these, the tribal uprisings of Eastern India hold a distinctive place, as they emerged from the deep rupture caused by colonial policies in the agrarian structure, forest rights, and traditional governance systems of indigenous peoples. Unlike peasant revolts driven primarily by land revenue oppression, tribal resistances combined economic grievances with a struggle to preserve autonomy, identity, and customary practices. Eastern India including present-day Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar, and West Bengal was historically home to tribes like the Mundas, Santhals, Oraons, and Hos. These communities thrived under communal landholding systems (such as the khuntkatti among the Mundas) and forest-based subsistence practices.

British colonial intervention through the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the introduction of zamindars and moneylenders (dikus), and later forest laws undermined this system. This transformation, accompanied by religious-cultural intrusion by Christian missionaries, generated deep resentment and laid the foundation for tribal uprisings, the most significant of which was the Munda Ulgulan led by Birsa Munda.[1]

These multi-dimensional pressures economic, political, and cultural created a fertile ground for repeated tribal revolts in the region, such as the Kol Rebellion (1831–32), the Santhal Hul (1855–56), and most significantly, the Munda Ulgulan (1899–1900).

The Munda Revolt, under the charismatic leadership of Birsa Munda, was not merely a spontaneous outburst but a well-organized movement that combined religious revivalism with socio-political resistance. Birsa's call for the establishment of Munda Raj and the expulsion of colonial authorities reflected both a yearning for autonomy and a defense of tribal traditions.[2] Although the revolt was brutally suppressed and Birsa died in prison in 1900, its consequences were far-reaching. The uprising compelled the colonial state to introduce protective legislation such as the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908, which sought to restrict the transfer of tribal lands to outsiders.[3]

Major causes of Tribal uprisings:-

- **Land Alienation and Breakdown of Tribal Agrarian Systems:-**

The imposition of the Permanent Settlement (1793) and the rise of zamindars destroyed the traditional khuntkatti system of communal landholding among the Mundas. Tribal land was steadily transferred to outsiders (dikus), including moneylenders and non-tribal peasants. By the late 19th century, large sections of Mundas had been reduced to tenants and sharecroppers on their own ancestral land.[4]

- **Exploitation by Moneylenders and Zamindars:-**

With cash crops and taxes replacing traditional subsistence economies, tribals became dependent on moneylenders, who charged exorbitant interest. Failure to repay often resulted in land dispossession. The rise of beth begari (forced labor without payment) added another layer of oppression.[5]

- **Colonial Forest Policies:-**

The Indian Forest Acts of 1865 and 1878 severely curtailed tribal rights to shifting cultivation (jhum), hunting, grazing, and collecting forest produce. These restrictions threatened both their economy and culture, as forests were integral to their way of life.[6]

- **Missionary Activity and Cultural Threats:-**

Christian missionaries, though offering education and healthcare, were perceived as eroding indigenous customs and beliefs. Birsa himself initially converted but later turned into a religious reformer, blending traditional faith with resistance to foreign domination.[7]

- **Loss of Political Autonomy:-**

The tribal chiefs (mankis and mundas) lost authority under colonial administration. The imposition of colonial courts and police undermined traditional self-governing systems, creating further resentment.[8]

Major Consequences:-

❖ **Suppression of the Revolt:-**

The Munda Ulgulan (1899–1900) was brutally crushed by the colonial army. Birsa Munda was arrested and died in prison in June 1900. Thousands of Mundas were jailed, executed, or displaced.[9]

❖ **Legislative Reforms:-**

The revolt shook the colonial administration, compelling it to introduce protective land legislation. The most significant was the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908), which legally restricted the transfer of tribal land to outsiders, thereby safeguarding tribal rights in theory.[10]

❖ **Revival of Tribal Identity and Religion:-**

Birsa's religious message—denouncing witchcraft, alcohol consumption, and idol worship—revitalized tribal society with a sense of pride and unity. Even after his death, Birsa was remembered as a prophet and Dharti Aba (Father of the Earth).[11]

❖ **Impact on Wider Tribal Movements:-**

The Ulgulan inspired subsequent tribal uprisings in Eastern and Central India, strengthening the tradition of localized resistance against colonial authority. The movement became part of the broader discourse of Indian nationalism, though distinct in its tribal roots.[12]

❖ **Legacy in Modern Tribal Politics:-**

Though suppressed, Birsa Munda remains a powerful symbol of indigenous resistance. His legacy played a major role in the demand for tribal autonomy, culminating in the creation of Jharkhand state in 2000.[13]

Major Tribal Uprising In Eastern India:-

❖ **The Chuar Uprising (1767–72; 1798–99):-**

The earliest organized tribal resistance in Bengal and present-day Jharkhand came from the Chuar tribes of the Jungle Mahals. Sparked by the harsh revenue policies of the East India Company after the Permanent Settlement (1793), the Chuars revolted against dispossession of their lands and oppressive demands of zamindars and Company officials. Although suppressed, these uprisings revealed the incompatibility of tribal socio-economic systems with colonial land revenue practices.[14]

The term *"Chuar"* in Bengali was historically used to denote lower-caste communities and often carried a derogatory connotation. Its usage can be traced back to medieval Bengali literature. For example, in the 16th-century *Chandimangal Kavya* composed by Mukundaram Chakrabarti, the character Kalaketu states:

অতি নীচ কুলে জন্ম
জাতিতে চোয়াড়
কেহ নাহি পরশ করে
লোকে বলে রাঢ়।

In the Rarh region, particularly in the Jungle Mahals, upper-caste groups—and later British officials following their lead used the term "Chuar" to refer to the Bhumij community inhabiting the vast areas of Medinipur, Bankura, and Manbhum. However, the label was not confined to the Bhumij alone; many marginalized and lower-caste groups were similarly categorized. Thus, *"Chuar" did not represent a specific tribe*, but rather a broad and often derogatory social classification.

The large-scale uprising led primarily by the Bhumij and other marginalized communities against British rule came to be known in history as the Chuar Rebellion. This rebellion posed a significant challenge to the land revenue system of the East India Company. During the 1790s, when the British were consolidating their authority across Bengal, the deeper implications of colonial rule were not fully grasped by the educated elite. However, the so-called "uneducated" tribal populations of the Jungle Mahals intuitively understood the exploitative nature of foreign rule. It is important to note that they were also among the earliest victims of colonial oppression. The British disrupted their traditional way of life, and this intrusion triggered widespread resistance across the forested region.

An often-overlooked dimension of the Chuar Rebellion is the conflict between the Burdwan Raj and the Bishnupur Raj. The Burdwan ruler acquired extensive *paikan* (military service lands) and *ghatwali* (rent-free service lands) in the region and imposed heavy revenue demands on them. As a result, the once prosperous Bishnupur estate under Raja Chaitanya Singh faced severe financial decline. Lands that were previously tax-free and held by *paiks* (traditional militia) and *barkandazes* (guards) were now heavily taxed, rendering many of them unemployed.

A contemporary observation by Commissioner Oswald captures the situation:"By driving to extremities numerous bodies of people, accustomed to consider these lands as their hereditary right from time immemorial… [they were] subjected… to a revenue of 14,000 Rs."[15]

Deprived of their traditional livelihoods, these armed groups turned against both the Burdwan ruler and the British. Facing intense resistance, Raja Tejchand of Burdwan appealed to the British to expel Chaitanya Singh from Bishnupur, suspecting his support for the rebels. The British administration also realized that revenue collection had become nearly impossible due to the rebellion.

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, the East India Company temporarily suspended land auctions. Officials like the Commercial Resident of Radhanagar noted that the tribal people were generally peaceful, hardworking, and honest, but had turned rebellious due to the absence of redress for their grievances. He even suggested appointing Gobardhan Digpati, a prominent Chuar leader, as the head of the Gwaltoar police station. Such conciliatory approaches were later incorporated into administrative reforms, including the formation of the Jungle Mahals district under Regulation XVIII of 1805.

From around 1800, the intensity of the Chuar Rebellion began to decline. The superior firearms of the British gave them a decisive advantage over the traditional weapons—bows, arrows, and spears—used by the rebels. Additionally, the then District Magistrate of Medinipur, Henry Stachey, adopted a more conciliatory policy, reducing revenue demands and entrusting local zamindars (often Bhumij leaders) with maintaining order.

Despite this, the rebellion had already created deep anxiety among the British authorities. The Chuars employed effective guerrilla warfare tactics, taking advantage of the dense forest terrain, which was unfamiliar to British troops. Soldiers often fell ill due to the harsh environmental conditions. Roads were blocked, trees were felled to disrupt troop movement, and sudden attacks were launched before retreating into the forests.

Almost all zamindars and peasants in the region stopped paying revenue. The close relationship between rebels and ordinary peasants transformed the uprising into a broader agrarian revolt, though it lacked a formal ideological framework. While British records frequently accused the Chuars of plunder and violence, they generally did not harm common peasants. Instead, their targets included enemy zamindars, government offices, postal communications, and collaborators of the Company. Even new land purchasers from Bengal and Hindustan were not spared.

The rebellion severely disrupted trade in the region, especially the collection and transportation of salt. British reports repeatedly noted that excessive oppression forced peasants to abandon cultivation, leading to agricultural decline and loss of revenue. Thus, the British were compelled to seek peace, even as they continued efforts to suppress the rebellion militarily. Local traditions claim that many rebels were executed at Gangani field in Garbeta.

Even after the formation of the Jungle Mahals district in 1805, traces of the rebellion persisted for some time. One of the prominent leaders was Rani Shiromoni, mother of the former Bishnupur zamindar Mahadev Singh. She faced severe financial distress during this period. Other leaders included Nimai Singh, Kshetramohan Singh, and Baidyanath Singh.

When Mahadev Singh was forced to leave Bishnupur, he took refuge in Chinsurah, where he later died. Rani Shiromoni's appeal for a pension was rejected by the British, further angering her subjects. A letter from Magistrate Blunt in 1808 indicates that sporadic unrest continued in the region even at that time.

The Chuar Rebellion was not merely a tribal uprising but a complex socio-economic resistance against colonial exploitation, oppressive land revenue policies, and the disruption of traditional rights. It reflected the early consciousness of indigenous communities against British rule and stands as a significant episode in the history of peasant and tribal resistance in India.

❖ **The Kol Rebellion (1831–32):-**

The Kol Rebellion of 1831–32 was a major tribal uprising against British colonial rule in the Chotanagpur region, covering areas such as Ranchi, Singhbhum, and Palamau. It was led by tribal communities including the Ho, Munda, and Oraon, who resisted the growing interference of the colonial administration in their traditional socio-economic and political systems.[16] The revolt was not sudden, but the result of long-term grievances that had been building among the tribal population due to rapid changes introduced under British rule.

One of the primary causes of the rebellion was land alienation caused by the entry of outsiders, known as *dikus*, into the tribal areas. These outsiders included moneylenders, zamindars, traders, and British officials who gradually took control of tribal lands under the new revenue system. Traditionally, land was held communally by the Kols, but colonial laws enabled outsiders to acquire land through manipulation and coercion. As a result, many tribal people lost their ancestral lands and were reduced to tenants or labourers.[17]

Economic exploitation further intensified discontent among the tribal communities. Moneylenders charged extremely high interest rates, trapping the Kols in cycles of debt, and often seized their lands when loans were not repaid. At the same time, zamindars imposed heavy rents and forced labour, worsening the economic condition of the people. This exploitation created widespread anger and played a crucial role in triggering the rebellion.[18]

Another important factor was the breakdown of traditional political institutions. The British replaced the authority of tribal chiefs and customary systems with courts, police, and revenue officials. This weakened indigenous governance and disrupted the social structure of tribal society. The Kols viewed this as a direct threat to their identity, autonomy, and way of life, which pushed them further towards rebellion.[19]

The rebellion began in 1831 and quickly spread across the region, with the rebels attacking police stations, houses of moneylenders, zamindars, and government establishments. They used traditional weapons and guerrilla tactics suited to the forested terrain. However, the British responded with strong military force and suppressed the revolt by 1832 using superior weapons and organized strategy. Despite its failure, the rebellion was significant as it exposed the exploitative nature of colonial rule and represented a powerful assertion of tribal resistance against land dispossession and social injustice.[20]

❖ **The Santhal rebellion (Hul) (1855–56):-**

The Santhal Rebellion, also known as the *Santhal Hul* (1855–56), was one of the largest tribal uprisings against British colonial rule in India. It took place in the Rajmahal Hills region, covering parts of present-day Jharkhand and West Bengal. The movement was led by Sidhu Murmu and Kanhu Murmu, along with their brothers, and represented a strong collective resistance of the Santhal community against colonial oppression.[21]

The main cause of the rebellion was the severe economic exploitation of the Santhals by *mahajans* (moneylenders), zamindars, and British officials. The Santhals were gradually trapped in a cycle of debt due to high interest rates and unfair practices of moneylenders. Many lost their lands and were forced into poverty. At the same time, zamindars imposed heavy rents, and colonial revenue policies increased the burden on the tribal population.[22]

Another important cause was the disruption of the Santhals' traditional social and political system. The British administrative structure weakened the authority of tribal leaders and ignored customary laws. The increasing entry of outsiders (*dikus*) into the region created pressure on land and resources. This threatened the Santhals' traditional way of life and led to growing resentment among them.[23]

In 1855, nearly 60,000 Santhals united under the leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu and declared open rebellion against British rule. They attacked police stations, government offices, moneylenders, and zamindars using traditional weapons like bows, arrows, and axes. The rebellion spread rapidly across the region and posed a serious challenge to colonial authority. However, the British suppressed the revolt with strong military action and modern weapons.

Although the rebellion was crushed by 1856, it had a lasting impact on colonial administration. The British realized the need for special governance in tribal areas and created a separate administrative unit known as the **Santhal Parganas** in 1855. The Santhal Rebellion remains a significant example of tribal resistance, highlighting the struggle against exploitation, land alienation, and colonial domination.

❖ **The Haribaba Movement:-**

The Haribaba Movement in the Chotanagpur region emerged as a significant socio-religious reform movement among tribal communities, particularly the Oraons and Hos, during the early twentieth century. This movement was not merely a religious revival but also reflected a growing political consciousness shaped by the influence of Gandhian ideology. According to contemporary interpretations, the movement drew inspiration from the principles of Mahatma Gandhi, especially his emphasis on simplicity, moral discipline, and non-violence.[24]

The leader, known as Haribaba (also identified as Duka Ho), encouraged his followers to adopt a disciplined and "pure" lifestyle. He advocated vegetarianism, the wearing of the sacred thread (*upanayana*), and the complete abandonment of alcohol. These practices symbolized both moral reform and social upliftment. Haribaba believed that by following such a way of life, the tribal population could contribute to the establishment of *Gandhi Raj*, an idealized form of just governance replacing British rule.[25]

An interesting aspect of the movement was its spread beyond a single tribe. The Santhals, too, became actively involved and began to resist colonial authority by refusing to pay the *chaukidar tax*. They gathered daily around the Congress flag, engaging in songs and dances that combined religious devotion with political expression. Initially, the number of followers was small—around two hundred—but with the intensification of the Civil Disobedience Movement, their numbers increased significantly. The followers worshipped the Hindu deity Hanuman and observed Thursday as a sacred day. They also practiced ritual bathing twice daily and worshipped the Tulsi plant, symbolically associated with Vaishnavite traditions. This reflects a unique cultural synthesis between tribal and mainstream Hindu practices.[26]

The movement also incorporated elements of devotional nationalism. Followers raised slogans such as *"Haribol"* alongside chants praising Gandhi, and popular songs circulated proclaiming the end of British rule and the victory of Gandhi. At the same time, they expressed hostility towards Christian missionaries and appealed to converted tribals to return to their original faith. Leaders like Tarachand, along with figures such as Chuka Ho and Bongamajhi, organized the collection of resources like rice, money, and cloth. These offerings were symbolically divided between deities like Kali and Durga and Gandhi; notably, the portion dedicated to Gandhi was often immersed in water, signifying a sacred act of offering. The followers believed that such practices would help them gain acceptance within the broader Hindu social order.[27]

Despite its reformist nature, the movement also had a political edge. The participants demanded forest rights and reduction of land revenue. When these demands were not met, sections of the movement turned more radical; in May 1931, they began cutting telegraph wires as a form of protest against British authority. Leaders like Shilu Ho declared

that British forces would be powerless against them, reflecting a belief system similar to earlier tribal uprisings such as the Santhal Rebellion (1855) and the Birsa Movement. Historian J. C. Jha has described this as a form of "messianic consciousness," where faith in divine or supernatural protection shaped resistance movements.[28]

The Haribaba Movement also shows a transition from purely religious reform to emerging political awareness. Large gatherings were organized in the Chotanagpur region, leading to the formation of associations such as the *Har Malto Marang Sabha*, which demanded voting rights and greater political representation for tribal communities. The influence of the Civil Disobedience Movement encouraged tribals to consider constitutional methods of protest, marking a shift in their political outlook. However, many of their grievances—such as exploitation by zamindars, moneylenders, officials, and survey authorities—remained unresolved, echoing earlier causes of tribal uprisings.[29]

It is important to note that despite the Congress Party's opposition to British rule, it failed to adequately address tribal demands when it came to power in provincial governments between 1937 and 1939. This created a sense of disillusionment among tribal communities. Although there was an opportunity for dialogue and reform, little concrete action was taken. Instead, Congress often nominated its own candidates in local institutions such as municipalities and district boards, sometimes sidelining genuine tribal leadership.[30]

The Haribaba Movement represents a complex blend of religious reform, cultural synthesis, and political awakening among tribal communities. It illustrates how Gandhian ideas were adapted within a tribal context, creating a unique form of resistance that combined spirituality with anti-colonial sentiment. At the same time, the persistence of "messianic" beliefs highlights the limitations of political awareness among tribal groups, who often relied on faith-based expectations in the absence of tangible socio-economic change.

The Munda Revolt and the Contribution of Birsa Munda:-

❖ **The Munda Tribe before the arrival of British Rule:-**

The Mundas believed they were the descendants of Singbonga,part of the Asur lineage, and asserted that they were the first inhabitants of the Chotanagpur region.[31] They were the residents of mainly Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Palamau, Singbhum, Manbhum and Dhanbad districts. Until the beginning of the communication system, the regions where the Mundas lived were unreachable, and they lived with their own customs and customary laws. As the area was mainly mountainous and forested, they worked hard for their livelihood. They had their own Mundari language in which they spoke but no written script. They were conservatives and did not want to mix up with the aliens. They were honest, and courageous with self-respect.Pahan, was the religious chief of the Munda tribe, who offered public sacrifices in the sarna, or the holy tree, to save the tribes from wickedness, for a good yield of the crop, and as submission to the Almighty. He also settled disputes according to customary laws. The Manki was the secular head. Both Manki and Pahan were hereditary posts with no overlapping of the powers between them. There were also bhuinhars whose forefathers were the original clearers of the land and, thus, the founders of the villages. The bhuinhars had khuntkatti tenures or ancestry possession over the land. The Mundas had their panchayati system with Manki and Pahan as the authorities who resolved community problems. This ancient socio-legal system was disturbed by the advent of European interference.[32]

❖ **Background of Munda Revolt:-**

The Munda Revolt (ulgulan) was the climax of a trail of Adivasi protests for over a century against injustice under British colonial rule. The British administration took effective control of Chhotanagpur since 1772. It imposed a new system of exploitation, introducing different forms of revenue demands and shades of landlords as frontline agents. As a proxy of the colonial government, the landlords and their subordinates practised various kinds of excesses upon the Adivasi cultivators. The restless Adivasis lost patience and rose in arms to resist colonial rule. The first revolt took place in Tamar near Khunti in 1789.The Adivasis opted for armed resistance since the authorities never cared for any communication with them. The aura of authority was high in the colonial mind. The British officials perceived the agitated Adivasis as habitual trouble makers and made no effort to understand them and their issues. The Adivasis, on their part, were in no mood to reconcile with the colonial evils. Since their first uprising, the protest has been unabated. A significant outlet of their anger was manifest in the Kol Revolt of 1831-32. After suppressing the revolt with an iron hand, the authorities, for the first time, heard the grievances of the Adivasis through an enquiry committee. A set of half-hearted British measures followed to placate them. But after a brief restraint, the process of exploitation and deprivation of the Adivasis relapsed. The landlords and their men came back with a vengeance. In subsequent years, as the mode of colonialism changed into free trade imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century, exploitation became thorough and intense.

After a brief period of calm following the Kol Revolt, the Adivasis became restless once more. From the experience of the Kol Revolt, they realised that armed resistance would be futile before the British military might. Pondering over what course to follow, they were introduced to the idea of adopting the agency of Christian missions and the concept of rule by law to protect themselves, brought by the colonialists as a new political dispensation to control the colonial subjects. The missionaries, belonging to the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran mission, demonstrated to them how to take up cases with the administration and the judiciary, which would be efficacious. The missionaries did it in order to win them over as Christians. In a few cases, the Adivasis were indeed restored to their lost agrarian rights. This impressed them and gave them new confidence.After the Kol Revolt, the government had already opened administrative units among the Adivasis and posted European officials, led by a Political Agent to the Governor General for the first time. Also opened, with a view to pacifying the mind, was the avenue of elementary education by a few government and missionary schools.Education enabled the Adivasi mind to understand the system of British governance and decipher official documents.

The milieu reared a group of elementarily educated Adivasi ‘Sardars’ or leaders, who, since 1858, conducted a constitutional movement based on petitioning the authorities and filing court cases to defend Adivasi rights. The movement went on for four decades, during which it turned militant, claiming the end of landlordism altogether and rehabilitation of the primeval Adivasi system run by mundas and mankis, the internal village headmen and chiefs of tracts of villages respectively. Responding to the movement, the British conducted two land surveys between 1859 and 1879. The whole exercise was conducted in a shoddy manner, ignoring the core issues. It resulted in Chota Nagpore Landlord and Tenant Procedure Act, 1879 which fell far short of the expectations of the Adivasis. By 1890, the movement left the Adivasi masses high and dry.The gap between tall claims and actual gain fumed a high degree of frustration in the Adivasi mind. The disappointment was aggravated by the memory of callous British attitude all through for over a century. This premised the emergence of young Birsa as a new leader.

❖ **Birsa Munda's Leadership and the revolt:-**

Against this background, Birsa Munda (1875–1900) emerged as a charismatic leader who combined religious revivalism, cultural assertion, and political mobilization. Initially influenced by Christian missionaries, Birsa later rejected them, proclaiming himself as a prophet and messiah (dharti aba or "Father of the Earth") sent to liberate his people.

- **Birsa emphasized a religio-political ideology:**
- He urged his followers to abandon superstitions, intoxication, and tribal divisions.
- He called for a return to traditional practices while opposing missionary influence.
- He proclaimed the idea of "Munda Raj" – a vision of tribal self-rule free from dikus and colonial authorities.

Under his leadership, thousands of Mundas mobilized in late 1899, attacking police stations, missionaries, moneylenders, and zamindars. The uprising was marked by both militant resistance and mass participation, symbolizing a collective struggle to restore tribal autonomy.

❖ **Suppression and Consequences:-**

The revolt was brutally suppressed by the colonial government using heavy military force. The British caught him in 1900 from Jamkopai forest, Chakradharpur. Birsa died in jail under suspicious circumstances in June of the same year at the young age of 25. Despite its suppression, the revolt left a profound legacy.

➢ **Consequences include:**

- **Political Impact:** The uprising highlighted the incompatibility of colonial land policies with tribal systems. In response, the British enacted the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908, which provided legal protection against the transfer of tribal lands to non-tribals.
- **Social Impact:** Birsa became a symbol of tribal pride and resistance, revered as a folk hero and prophet. His memory continues to inspire tribal identity movements across Jharkhand and Eastern India.
- **Religious and Cultural Impact:** Birsa's message of reform strengthened tribal cultural consciousness and helped resist cultural assimilation by outsiders.

Legacy of Birsa Munda:-

Even though the life of Birsa Munda is surrounded by myth and rumours, there is no denying that perhaps no other tribal hero in Indian history has gained so much popularity and honour. His movement blended the agrarian revolt and religious reformation, as well as political resistance. To his community, Birsa was a heavenly character, and his rebellion assumed a great impetus, irrespective of the facts or fiction of his myths and miracles. Despite knowing the military strength of the mighty British government, he did not want to lose the hope and faith of his fellowmen in him and so sacrificed his life. Though his expected success did not immediately materialize, his love for his fellowmen and his feeling of their pulse made him their hero forever. Under Birsa's leadership, Munda's fought a massive revitalization movement that alarmed not only the mighty British power but also left an indelible feeling among his tribesmen for generations. His agitation was termed as "Ulgulan" or The Great Uprising and was also one of the millenarian movements in tribal India. Activist and writer Mahasweta Devi wrote "অরণ্য মুন্ডাদের মা, আর দিকুরা মুন্ডাদের জননীকে অপবিত্র করে রেখেছ৷ উলগুলানের আগুন জ্বেলে বীরসা জননীকে শুদ্ধ করতে চেয়েছিল" (Forest is the mother of the Mundas, outsiders have defiled the mother. Birsa sought to purify the forest/mother through the fire of

the Great Uprising.) She also added, "উলগুলানের শেষ নাই! বীরসার মরণ্ নাই !"(Debi,p.322) (The Great Uprising never ends! Birsa never dies!) Even Birsa's life, myths and miracles have influenced many aborigine poets of Indian origin such as UshaKiran Atram, a poetess who wrote:

"Birsa once again you come
Take birth in the womb of tribal mothers
Once again you call for Ulgulan
Our glory of forest burnt out
Our forest is suffering by the incurable diseases" [33]

Conclusion:-

The tribal uprisings of colonial Eastern India represent some of the most powerful yet often marginalized strands of India's freedom struggle. From the Chuar Rebellions (late 18th century) in Bengal to the Kol Uprising (1831–32), the Santhal Hul (1855–56), and finally the Munda Ulgulan (1899–1900), these movements reveal a consistent pattern of resistance rooted in the defense of land, forest, and cultural identity. Unlike mainstream nationalist agitations, these revolts were not guided by elite politics but emerged from the lived realities of dispossession, bonded labour, indebtedness, and the destruction of traditional socio-economic systems under colonial rule.

Among these, the Munda Revolt under Birsa Munda stands out for its organizational strength, religious revivalism, and its vision of establishing Munda Raj as an assertion of autonomy. While the revolt was suppressed and Birsa himself died in captivity in 1900, the movement left a lasting imprint on colonial policy. The enactment of protective legislations such as the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 marked a direct consequence of this uprising, reflecting the recognition by the British that unchecked exploitation could provoke recurring unrest.

Taken together, these uprisings highlight two crucial dimensions of colonial Eastern India. First, they expose the deep incompatibility between tribal systems of communal landholding, subsistence economy, and spiritual worldviews on one hand, and the exploitative structures of colonial revenue policies, forest laws, and capitalist penetration on the other. Second, they demonstrate the resilience of tribal societies, whose resistance, though localized, became an integral part of the wider fabric of India's anti-colonial struggle.

In historical memory, figures like Tilka Manjhi, Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, and Birsa Munda embody this indomitable spirit of resistance. Their legacies underline that the freedom movement was not only a narrative of urban elites but also of marginalized voices fighting for dignity, identity, and survival. Thus, the tribal uprisings of Eastern India—culminating in the Munda Ulgulan—must be recognized as foundational to the broader history of resistance against colonial domination in India.

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