

Birsa Munda, Role in Freedom Struggle, UPSC Notes

July 4, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



Birsa Munda (1875-1900) is remembered as a tribal freedom fighter and folk hero who was instrumental in India's independence movement, particularly in British India's **tribal regions**. He spearheaded a major tribal uprising against British colonial rule and oppressive land policies. His leadership of the Munda Rebellion, also known as the '**Ulgulan**' or the '**Great Tumult**,' was a watershed moment in India's struggle for independence and tribal rights.

His birth anniversary, November 15, is observed as '**Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas**' (Tribal Pride Day) and **Jharkhand Foundation Day**, commemorating the state's formation in 2000. Birsa Munda's legacy continues to inspire contemporary Indian movements for tribal rights and social justice.

About Birsa Munda

Birsa Munda was born on November 15, 1875, in **Khunti district, Jharkhand**, in the Munda tribe, an indigenous community of the **Chotanagpur Plateau**. His early life was shaped by the harsh realities of British colonial rule, such as tribal land exploitation and dispossession.

The British imposed the **zamindari system**, replacing the traditional '**Khuntkatti**' system, which allowed tribal communities to collectively own land. This resulted in widespread land loss, leaving many tribals as landless

labourers subject to forced labour, high rents, and poor working conditions.

Birsa Munda Birsait

Birsa began his education in **Salga** and after converting to Christianity, he attended a German Mission School. Realising that the British used education as a tool for conversion, he quickly left the mission school and established his own faith, '**Birsait**.'

- This religious movement advocated for a return to indigenous traditions and beliefs, and it gained a sizable following in the Munda community.
- His followers, known as '**Birsaits**,' saw the British as their adversaries and embraced Birsa's teachings on resistance to colonial and feudal oppression.

Birsa Munda Role in the Freedom Struggle

Birsa Munda's leadership during the Munda Rebellion (Ulgulan) of 1899–1900 is remembered as a pivotal moment in India's fight against British Rule in India. This rebellion was a direct response to the British government's oppressive policies, which included the implementation of new land settlement systems and Forest Laws that limited tribal access to their traditional lands.

- **Munda Rebellion (Ulgulan):** Birsa Munda led the Munda Rebellion (1899-1900), a major tribal uprising against British rule, challenging exploitative policies like land settlements and Forest Laws.
- **Formation of Munda Raj:** Birsa unified tribal groups under the concept of 'Munda Raj,' advocating for self-rule and organising guerrilla attacks on British forces. He targeted symbols of colonial authority, uniting tribal communities in resistance.
- **Symbol of Tribal Resistance:** Birsa's slogan, "**Abua raj seter jana, maharani raj tundu jana**" ("End the queen's reign, establish our own rule"), captured his vision for tribal self-government.
- **Advocate for Tribal Rights:** Birsa strongly opposed land dispossession and advocated for tribal land rights, influencing the **Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908**, which prohibited the transfer of tribal lands to non-tribals and recognised traditional community rights over land, water, and forests.
- **Religious Leadership:** Birsa founded the 'Birsait' faith, which blended traditional animist beliefs and social reforms. He urged his followers to reject superstitions and embrace tribal traditions, earning him the title **Dharti Aba** (Father of the Earth).
- **Death:** Birsa Munda was captured by the British in March 1900 and died under mysterious circumstances in Ranchi Jail on **June 9, 1900**. His death marked the end of the rebellion, but his legacy as a tribal leader and resistance icon endures.

Birsa Munda Legacy

Birsa Munda is commemorated as a tribal hero, with **November 15** celebrated as '**Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas**' and Jharkhand's founding on his birth anniversary in 2000. His legacy continues with a museum in Ranchi and the 'PM-JANMAN' initiative promoting justice and empowerment for tribal communities.

- **Inspiration and Commemoration:** Birsa Munda is celebrated as a key figure in Jharkhand, with his birth anniversary on November 15 marked as '**Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas**' to honour tribal contributions to India's freedom struggle.
- **Government Initiatives:** The establishment of the '**PM Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM-JANMAN)**' reflects modern efforts to support vulnerable tribal groups, continuing Birsa Munda's vision of justice and empowerment.

Birsa Munda UPSC PYQs

Question1. With reference to the history of India, “Ulgulan” or the Great Tumult is the description of which of the following events? **(UPSC Prelims 2020)**

- (a) The Revolt of 1857
- (b) The Mappila Rebellion of 1921
- (c) The Indigo REvolt of 1859-60
- (d) Birsa Munda’s Revolt of 1899-1900

Answer: (d)

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