



Birsa Munda

For any man death is inevitable. If the death occurs more than a century ago it is naturally it will be forgotten. But some incidents of death are there which cannot be put to oblivion even after passage of a century. Such a memorable death had occurred on 9th June of 1900. In the silent dark cell of Ranchi Jail a twenty five year old youth succumbed to death on that day. He was Birsa Munda, the heroic leader of the revolt of oppressed and humiliated tribal people of Chhotanagpur region. The simple, broad minded and diligent tribal people of these areas were subjects of inhuman exploitation of land lords and money lenders and their agents on the one hand and on the other hand by the British. Against this ruthless exploitation by end of 19th century people burst out in life and death battle which continued from 1895 to 1900. The struggle facing unbearable torture bloodshed and countless deaths created a new history of valiance, sacrifice and greatness of character which acts as a fountain of inspiration to any people fighting exploitation and oppression till today.

The Khuti police station area of Chhotanagapur was a rural belt ravaged by poverty and misery. On the one hand starvation, absence of medical facility or minimum amenities of a civilised human, on the other hand constant exploitation and oppression, death due to ruthless torture, all these cast a darkness of gloom in the entire region. In this area, in a poverty stricken Munda family of Ulihatu village, Birsa was born. While entire period of his childhood was being spent in unbearable poverty and starvation, in such a period his maternal aunty proposed to take him to her home for upbringing. His father Sugna Munda also was not in a position to refuse because he was unable to bring up all his children even in semi-starvation. Thus Birsa Munda was shifted to his aunt's house in Khatanga. But there, instead of a family child, he was mostly treated as a servant boy. Daily he used to take the goats and lambs to pastures for grazing. One day, when Birsa was playing with other shepherd boys and became a bit unmindful, some wild animal took away one goat from the herd. When Birsa returned he was brutally beaten by the husband of his aunt for this negligence of duty.

Being very much physically and emotionally injured the boy escaped from aunt's home and returned to his family. But his poor father was unable to feed him. So once again he was sent to his father in-law's house in nearby Ahubhatu village. Here the child was brought with some better condition. Not only he got food but was sent to the lower primary school in the nearby Salga village for education. The teacher of that school Mr. Jaypal nag was a highly respected man in the locality. He used to do variety of social works in the locality. He took care of both mental and physical development of each of the students of the school and also did try to make them conscious regarding the social and life problems. This village teacher had deep influence on the nature and character of Birsa Munda, the hero of Munda rebellion.

After completion of lower primary school Birsa was admitted to Burju Mission school for upper primary education. In those days, missionaries of British Anglican mission and German Lutheran mission, both were highly active in those parts. Here, along with education, he was also baptized by Christian missionaries. His father was also converted to Christianity by the church. Seeing the intelligence and sincerity in Birsa he was sent to German Lutheran Mission school in the nearby town Chaibasha(now headquarter of West Singbhum District in Jharkhand), for high school studies, staying in hostel. In this period although the purpose of the government to provide school education was only to produce some obedient servants from among the 'natives', but in spite of that, whatever education, regarding western history and modern science etc., was catered that helped the spread of modern ideas and thoughts of renaissance among the local population. These ideas helped to make people conscious against the ruthless exploitation and oppression of the British rulers. Although not in the proportion of renaissance but whatever education had been catered by missionaries among the extremely totally backward tribal population of the Chhotanagpur belt that had created some consciousness regarding the rights of the ignorant and illiterate tribal people. The resentment caused by the long standing exploitations and oppression by the landlords and the usurer money lenders that, in the light of the new conscious, prepared the ground for explosion in the form of spontaneous movements.

While we study the life of Birsa Munda in the backdrop of Munda revolt, we must remember that these tribal people, for thousands and thousands of years, remained confined within the hills and forests of the region, isolated from the civilization. They became habituated to view any outsiders as 'dikus' that is enemies of the population, living in the forest. They maintained tremendous hatred, fear and aversion towards the civilization outside the forests and any of its representatives. So the civilization at large, its education culture and art nothing could cast any influence on their life. As a result the life of the population in these areas remained at very backward level, totally at the mercy of variety of natural forces and factors. The tremendous sufferings and misery of

the backward tribal people created in Birsa Munda the inspiration for life and death struggle and sacrifice.

As a result of remaining isolated from the external civilisation for a long time, the social system there had little traces of class division. For a long time in order to fight the hostile natural forces, they toiled collectively in order to convert the stone strewn sterile forest lands by cutting the forest and removing the stones, into fertile agricultural lands. Villages had developed surrounding these stretches of arable lands. The land, jungle, sources of water, everything was considered as the collective properties of the village communities. With increase of population newer and newer such habitations developed. The heads of those villages were usually described as Mundas. Many such villages taken together constituted a patty. The head of patty was called Manki. This Munda and Manki were not ruler posts. They were the leaders of the clan only. Common villagers sometimes offered some gifts to them, but there was no compulsion. Many such tribal groups, through their collective efforts, converted large stretches of unproductive forest lands into fertile agricultural lands. Gradually, with passage of time, among these tribal people, some Kings emerged as a result of a process of class division. Although the tribal forest dwellers had tremendous aversion towards the outsiders, but the kings, who constituted the nascent ruling class there, with the passage of time developed link with the 'civilised' people outside the forests. In order to consolidate the ruling position they started to recruit the administrators from more experienced people of outer civilisations. For developing their mercenary army they started to recruit experienced warriors from northern India. In this connection some merchants, priests usurers and variety other parasitic population started to infiltrate the secluded tribal habitations. They resorted to the ruthless exploitation of the simple tribals, who were hitherto totally unacquainted with the exploitation manoeuvres of outer world. The ruthless torture, exploitation and the humiliating behaviour of these outsiders created the strong hatred and aversion among the tribal's towards the outsiders in general (dikus).

Along with them came the Britishers by the end of 18 century, to add to woe of the backward tribal people. The usurers and mahajans, utilizing variety of fraudulent techniques, used to take away the land of the simple, innocent tribals, illiterate and totally unacquainted with paper works. They were implicated in ruthless debt traps and converted into landless bonded labourers, toiling as animals entire life on the usurers lands which once they converted into fertile land and belonged to them. Such was the insulted, humiliated and oppressed life of serfdom imposed upon them. This ruthless exploitation, combining the outsiders, landlords, mahajans and police administration of Britishers was going beyond all limits of forbearance by the beginning of the 19 century. So during the entire 19th century one after another popular mass uprisings

occurred in Jangalmahal, covering vast parts of Bengal, Jharkhand and Orissa. The revolt of Chhotanagpur of 1820-21, the Munda, Onrao, Chero and Santhal (different tribal communities) uprisings of 1831 in the areas of Ranchi, Muri, Hazaribagh area, Bhumija revolt of Manbhum (Now in Purulia District, West Bengal) in 1831-32, Santhal revolt of Santhal Paragana (covering parts of present Birbhum District of West Bengal and Dumka District of Jharkhand and vast adjacent areas) of 1855-56, Ho (a tribal community) revolt of Singhbhum (now in Jharkhand) in 1857, Munda revolt of Ranchi district 1889, Sardar uprising in Ranchi district in 1894-95 etc. spontaneously bursted out one after another in these areas. Among all these rebellions the Santhal uprising under the leadership of Sidho Murmu and Kanhu Murmu, was of foremost significance, in its dimension and depth. The thousands and thousands of determined Santhal people, with the help of their bows and arrows and other primitive weaponry waged and organised protracted battle against highly equipped modern British army and offered determined resistance to them. Even in some battles they were able to thwart the British army. Many downtrodden non-tribal people also supported and participated in these uprisings. Many men faced death without any care for their own life, in the battle fields and faced torture in prisons. The heroism and valiance of the Santhal uprising is still remembered by the population of Santhal Pargana with pain and pride. In this environment of revolt Birsa Munda was growing in his student days. While he was a student of upper class in mission school in Chaibasha, one after another significant incidents took place surrounding the four walls of the school boundary. The missionaries, with backing of the government-administration started to capture the collective or individual lands of the tribal population in the surrounding areas, in variety of ways. Against this clandestine manoeuvres of the missionaries, the Munda people did burst out in protest. Meanwhile, the Mundas were already fighting against the exploitation and although they paid tax to the government, but refused to pay additional tax to the landlords. Birsa, through interaction with the European school teachers of the mission school came to know about land laws then existing in European countries. He also came to know that the land holders of Europe enjoyed full right on their lands by paying small amount of tax only to the government. So he wholeheartedly supported the tax boycott movement of Mundas. But the authorities of missionary school maintained strong opposition to the movements of Mundas for their own and rights. Once father Notraught of his school was vehemently condemning the struggle of Mundas to the students of his class. Birsa stood up in bold protest against that. In his early life he was highly attracted by the missionaries in school but when he observed their contempt and naked opposition to the legitimate struggle of the Munda community, he became disillusioned about them. Had he been more conscious about his own personal career and well being, he could have remained in the missionary school of Chaibasha, but

Birsa did not care and left the mission school, plunging totally into the uncertainties of life.

Birsa's return to his family village had been shifted to village Chalkad from Ulihatu. His cousin brother, the son of his fraternal uncle, was killed by a tiger a few days before. Birsa was trying hard to help his family, ravaged by extreme poverty and misery. He joined the work as a servant in a rich family in a neighbouring village. But there he could not stay for long. So he returned to his family. There also soon situation became hostile to him. The chief of tribal society used to maintain variety of superstitious beliefs. One of the tribal witch doctors of the village used variety of occult practices to 'treat' diseases and nature calamities. The common villagers also strongly believed in these practices. Birsa, due to his modern education, was free from these superstitions and strongly opposed the activities of the witch doctors. This developed serious conflict with the witch-doctor practitioners with him. Very soon an epidemic of smallpox was spread in that area. Birsa moved from village to village to nurse the patients, but the witch doctor of the area declared that Birsa was the cause of the epidemic and ordered that he must be driven away in order to get rid of the disease. At that moment Birsa was not in a position to fight this superstitious order of the witch doctor. So in spite of strong unwillingness to leave the helpless patients, Birsa had to forsake his family and village.

The next 3 years Birsa stayed with the family Anand Pande who was the manager of the landlord of Bandgaon village, as an agricultural labourer. Here Birsa used to do hard labour in the fields and in night he used to study and do variety of discussions with Anand Pande who was a devoted Vaisnava. Anand Pande used to tell him the stories of Ramayana, Mahabharata, heroic episodes of Bhima, Arjuna, Laxmana etc. With him Birsa used to go to the Katchari (tax collection office) of the landlord Jagmohan Singh and closely watched the extremely luxurious and extravagant life style of the landlord and at the same time extremely contemptuous and tortuous attitude towards the poor peasants vis-a-vis the hard toil and suffering of the poor peasants. The suffering and tears of the poor peasants made him restless. Amid all the things Birsa read some books on herbal medicine belonging to Anand Pande and learnt the practice of Ayurvedic treatment. The patience, diligence and persevering of Birsa created an attraction towards him in Anand. He made Birsa his close associate. But the restlessness due to sufferings of poor people and contemplations for their emancipation did not allow him to stay with Anand Pande for long. In this period also two young Munda girls offered their love to Birsa. But affection of his master, attractions of love in youth nothing could keep him confined there. Meanwhile the rebellions of Sardars created a sensation in the life of Mundas also. They started the movement of boycott of

tax to the landlords. While this movement was going on Birsa left the house of Anand Pande and returned to Chalkad.

The Munda leaders leading the tax boycott movement had a strong illusion that boycotting tax of the landlords if they pay the tax to British government, the administration will accept it and police will protect them from the onslaughts of the landlords. So they appealed to Kolkata high court against the landlords and with firm belief they staked everything to win the litigation. Through wide campaign they spread an illusion among the vast Munda population that relief is certain and to come soon. But those simple tribals did not have any idea regarding court and judicial system. For the expenses of the litigation they handed over all their belongings to the Munda leaders in the hope of justice. But the justice came as a ruthless sarcasm to shatter their hope. The British administration had entirely combined with the landlords and in 1895 the Munda leaders and a large number of innocent Munda people were arrested without prior notice, in the charge of inciting people against the government. In this manner the urge for getting justice of this innocent and simple people was shattered. The incident had a far reaching effect in Birsa Munda's life. The ground was also prepared for his emergence as a leader of the oppressed masses of this locality.

Meanwhile, in 1894 in order to protect the right of the landlords and deprive the common peasants of the right to their land, an act viz. Protected Forest act - viii(1882) was imposed in the forest areas of Palamou, Manbhum, Chhotanagpur etc. By dint of this act the landlords started to evict the common peasants from the lands they cultivated for generations. Even they were forced out of their houses in order to annex the land. Against these atrocities Birsa Munda united the people of six neighbouring villages and in the year 1894 organised a demonstration of the peasants and submitted a memorandum to the government authorities in Chaibasha town. The government totally ignored their demands. Immediately after this incident the Sardar rebellion was also suppressed by the government. Although the outburst of movements could be suppressed by all the repressive measures but the pent up grievance among the people could not be obliterated, rather it intensified day by day. This created virtually an explosive situation in the entire forest belt.(Jangalmahal). Observing all these things Birsa felt that movement should be organised not only against the landlords and usurers but at the same time against the British administration. Hence he started to prepare for a protracted struggle against injustice and oppression.

Although due to his modern education he was free from superstitions prevailing among the tribal population, he understood that the tribals, divided in variety of communities and religious beliefs must be united first. He observed the tribals deprived of modern education felt themselves helpless in face of natural calamities, diseases and

epidemics and took refuge in witch-craft, variety of occult practices and worships of innumerable gods and goddesses. Birsa, in order to unite the entire population, instead of occult practice and polytheism, introduced the worship of one god Sing Bonga. He moved door to door and created confidence in them. Told them 'It is the message of god that the darkness of night will go and bright morning will shine in your life. For that only you have to stand erect, united, rise up with moral strength, devotion and courage and face all the onslaughts.' Taking lessons from the stories of different religious movements and his studies of modern western education he understood that in order to fight one must emerge as a leader and a trained group of followers are to be produced, who will devote themselves in this struggles for religious and social reform of the extremely backward tribal society. He started to campaign some commandments e.g. 1. To stop the practice of sacrifice of animals in religious occasions , 2. To stop drinking of liquor (hanria), 3. To stop lying and stealing, 4. To pay respect to the aged, 5. To love everybody and fight hatred and animosity among themselves, 6. Keep the body and mind clean and fresh (pavithra) etc .

This movement created a new hope and new moral uprising in the Munda society and provided an ideological strength necessary for struggle. From different parts of Jangalmahal like Kochang, Sinjuri, Longa, Kalmar, Katoi, Birbanki, Kurunga, Banpiru and such other near and far villages, thousands and thousands of tribals came and assembled in Chalkad. They got a new message from the young man of 20 years and accepted him as their new leader. This young leader were described by them as their father, Birsa attained the name Dharti Awa - their god. This sent an alert message to the rulers. The landlords and missionaries launched a counter campaign that Birsa is doing all these things out of his own greed for power and position, to project himself as 'God'. The proof is that he is claiming himself as the father of the world (Dharti Awa). But Birsa never claimed himself to be so. He was described in this way by the common oppressed people, who expressed their faith in his spiritual and moral leadership, not for lust of power. His life is a testimony that for his feelings towards oppressed, insulted and humiliated people, Birsa left his career, home and hearth. The stir that was created due to his emergence as leader of Mundas created fear in the minds of landlords, mahajans and also the missionaries because a large section of the Munda people were diverted from them and expressed their allegiance to Birsa. Due to their pressure, on 24th September of 1895, Birsa and some of his followers were suddenly arrested. The very next day a meeting was supposed to be held and in order to organise it most of his followers were away to distant villages. So very few were with him when he was arrested. Many people rushed towards the spot and became very excited due to his arrest, but Birsa understood that at that moment any conflict will be premature and that will disturb his far reaching objective. So he pacified everyone and convinced them to

return peacefully. Birsa and his followers were punished with two years of rigorous imprisonment and fine in the charge of sedition.

In 1897, before completion of his jail term, he was released on the occasion of 75th birth anniversary of Queen Victoria along with many other political prisoners during these two years of imprisonment firstly Birsa realised the necessity of preparation for armed struggle. Secondly many myths and rumours surrounding him which created his initial popularity as 'God' among the Mundas were diluted by this time and his image was created as a political leader fighting for the cause of oppressed tribals. Thirdly, in face of one after another rebellions the British government amended the Tenancy act of 1879 although that couldn't solve the basic problems ultimately. Fourthly, when Calcutta, Delhi, Ranchi or Chaibasha and such other cities and towns were celebrating the 75th anniversary of Queen Victoria with much festival fanfare at the same time in the entire Chhotanagpur belt, thousands and thousands of tribals were dying due to wide spread famine. Later epidemic of smallpox added to the woes of the common people. Immediately after his release, Birsa plunged into day and night relief work to save the lives of the people. His tireless role during the relief works again made him the unchallenged leader of the tribals. Amid famines starvation and pains of disease the suffering people once again started to dream of a new sunrise. There from started the preparation for the uprising -- the Ulgulan. A band of followers of Birsa spread in different parts of the region to campaign the commandments of Birsa among the tribals and organised them. Taking lessons from the earlier experience the meetings were organised in secret places avoiding the eye of the landlords, mahajans and their agents. The special meetings for the preparations of war used to be organised in secluded jungles above hills like Dombari or Sail Reqab. Birsa also in order to spread the organisation and pick up staunch fighters, moved from village to village of Lohardaga, Bulu, Nagfeni and such other police station areas. He divided different important organisational responsibilities to his able followers like Donka and Gaya Munda, Dimka Munda, Tatiram Munda and Risha Munda. Birsa instructed everywhere to avoid unnecessary and individual killing. The plan was to go for armed uprising for first one day then to go for protracted battle involving the common masses aggrieved due to exploitation and oppression. On 24th December 1899 the uprising started simultaneously in Ranchi, Shonpur Chaibasha and such other important places, which were spread over a vast region. On the first day's attack a large number of police personnel, landlords, merchants and missionaries were killed. The rebels attacked the Khunti police station. All the police personnel fled. one tried to intimidate the rebels by firing his rifle but he was chased and caught and torn to pieces. The police station and many houses were also burnt. The uprising continued from 24 December 1899 up to 7th January 1900 with such intensity and dimension that the local police and administration

became totally in disarray to restrain the rebels. Two companies of military was brought to suppress the rebellion. In order to confront the military thousands and thousands of rebels comprising young boys and girls, armed with bows, arrows, spears and such other traditional weapons, assembled in Sail Reqab hill.

The British generals commanded them to surrender immediately. The Munda rebels refused with contempt. Rather they exhorted: "Why you foreigners are capturing our land and our country? You go away immediately." The British general ordered firing and the rebels retaliated with arrow and spears. Naturally, it was not possible to fight for long the modern arms with bows and arrows. So the rebels were defeated. But the British army was not satisfied with just defeating them. Rather they resorted to indiscriminate killing, including innumerable children and women, so that the rebellion might not revive again. The news of rebellion, number of deaths and brutality of in killing was totally censored. Dead bodies were disposed overnight through mass burial. Many injured also were buried alive.

The British forces started combing operation in villages after villages to hound out Birsa Munda. During this process conflicts and resistances occurred in many places. In the attempt to arrest Gaya Munda, the close associate of Birsa Munda, three police personnel were killed. Gaya Munda's house was torched and he was killed on spot. But in spite of all out attempts the police and the intelligence department was unable to arrest Birsa Munda. The poor people facing all onslaughts and torture saved and guarded him. But ultimately a traitor was purchased by lakhs of rupees to divulge the information regarding whereabouts of Birsa to British authorities. When Birsa was arrested on 3rd march 1900 and kept imprisoned in Chaibasha jail, thousands and thousands of tribals from distant villages started to pour in to have a look at their beloved revered Birsa Bhagawan, the Dharti Awa. The British authorities were well aware that hanging of Birsa would have what a tremendous shock reaction among the tribal people. So while his trial, in its namesake was going on in the court, as a travesty of justice suddenly the rumour was spread that Birsa died in jail due to cholera. It was believed that Birsa was killed in a dastardly manner by poisoning him within the jail. In the jail records there was no evidence of treatment to any patient for Cholera on that day. But to prevent the possible uprising as a reaction to Birsa's hanging the all powerful British administrators perhaps had to invent such a cowardly method to liquidate this rebel hero.

The death of Birsa and crushing of the Munda rebellion was not an isolated incident, or a matter of concern for Munda community alone. More than hundred years have passed after his death but the name of Birsa Munda is still living. Naturally a question arises today what is the relevance of Birsa's struggle. Who will Commemorate

Birsa Munda? Only the tribal people or only the more particular Munda Community, or any person irrespective of caste, creed or community identity, who is fighting against exploitation, oppression and injustice within the society. This question arises more particularly because a section of his biographers tried to pose him as a leader of the Munda community alone. Today there is a growing trend in election politics to divide people on the basis of caste, community, religion and nationality sentiments and try to take advantage of that. The so-called champions of tribal politics are trying to utilise Birsa Munda's image to kindle the community sentiment and ensure their votes. This is a heinous distortion of the spirit upheld by Birsa Munda. The demands which he raised were not the demands of tribals alone. Those were the demands of any exploited people irrespective of caste, community or tribe, and had a democratic content in it. Similarly the oppressors they fought included not only the Britishers and non tribal landlords, although a few, but also some rich landlords belonging to tribal communities. It is true that the rebellion led by Birsa Munda in those days couldn't be a part and parcel of the freedom struggle that developed immediately after. His struggle was not inspired by the spirit of nationalism and patriotism also. That was a basic shortcoming of the Indian nationalism itself, which developed in our country at a peculiar juncture of history, when capitalism was already in crisis. The Nationalism, in spite of all its positive aspects, remained religion oriented and couldn't embrace the people of all caste, community and religion at large. Moreover, the compromising leadership of the nationalist movement tried to confine the national struggle within the bounds of bargaining so they refrained from upholding the incidents of mass struggle to inspire the people. Even some of the leaders, out of religious sentiments upheld the struggle of Shivaji or Ranapratap, although they were feudal landlords, only because the nationalism were Hindu religion oriented nationalism. But Birsa Munda's struggle, inspite of all its democratic contents, almost remained out of the purview of the freedom struggle, beyond the view and imagination of the broader masses. The suffering of the people, starvation, death without any treatment, illiteracy and the ignorance, which had created a craving in Birsa to fight for justice and human rights, all those things are prevalent in society still today. Rather due to intensification of the exploitation by the crisis ridden capitalism manifold, the situation is much more miserable. The necessity to fight against it, to organise the people is the war cry today. And in any such struggle Birsa Munda's heroic battle and the martyrdom will continue to act as a fountain of inspiration.