

# PM Narendra Modi remembers Birsa Munda on his birth anniversary: All you need to know about him



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## Mini

Birsa Munda was a social reformer, freedom fighter and religious leader who sought to protect tribal communities from the oppressive system of the British Raj.



November 15 marks the birth anniversary of the legendary freedom fighter Birsa Munda. During the 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav' on Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi remembered the tribal figure and his contribution to national development.

"Like we mark 15th August, 26th January, Gandhi Jayanti and Sardar Patel Jayanti, we shall mark 15th November, the Jayanti of Bhagwan Birsa Munda as Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas. This will be a day to celebrate the glorious tribal culture and contribution to national development," PM Modi tweeted.

The government has planned a week-long celebration starting from November 15 to 22 to celebrate and commemorate 75 years of glorious history of tribal people, culture and achievements. More than 705 tribal communities are officially recognized as "Scheduled Tribes" in India.

## Who was Birsa Munda?

Birsa Munda was a tribal freedom fighter, religious leader, folk hero, and one of the most iconic figures in India's struggle against British rule. Coming from the Munda tribe, Birsa was born in the Ulihatu or Chalkad village in the Lohardaga district of Bengal Presidency, now the Khunti district of Jharkhand, in either 1872 or 1875.

As a *ryot*, the lowest among the Mundari khuntkatti system, he was the lowest rank peasant. Later in his life, Birsa attended a German Mission School and briefly converted to Christianity.

While accounts of his life were documented much later, folk tales about Birsa among the Munda are prevalent. Birsa was said to be a strong and handsome man who also happened to be a talented musician. An expert flutist, Birsa also played the *tuila*, the one-stringed instrument made from pumpkin.

## Activism

After leaving the German Mission School, Birsa and his family denounced Christianity. Birsa instead founded a religion named 'Birsait', which drew inspiration from Vaishnavism, Christianity and Mundari. Birsait quickly found scores of followers in the Munda and Oraon community, and members of the faith were actively working against British conversion efforts. It was his followers who named him Dharti Aaba, father of the Earth. Under his guidance, tribal culture flourished once again.

Birsa's later years saw him fight the British as well as the landowners who sought to impose themselves on tribal lands at the expense of the tribal communities. The system of jagirs, thikadars and zamindars was further exploited by the British colonial governors to establish better control over the country which often led to increasing impoverishment of tribal communities.

Birsa joined the Sardar Agitations in 1897. The Sardar Agitations were a series of protests organised by Sardar Ajit Singh, Bhagat Singh's uncle, against the anti-farmer Punjab Colonisation Act (Amendment) 1906 law and associated administrative orders which increased water rates for farmers. Birsa joined the movement to fight for the rights of farmers and tribals in his area.

Between 1897 and 1900, Birsaites often clashed with the British. Skirmishes often involved hundreds of men and women.

Stating that "abua raj setar jana, maharani raj tundu jana" (let the kingdom of the Queen end and our kingdom be established), Birsa launched the the "Ulgulan" (revolt) against the colonial power as well as oppressive landlords, an event which saw 7,000 men and women gather on Christmas in 1899 and launch an attack on Christianised Mundas, missionaries, the Church, shopkeepers and the local police station. The followers targeted Christianised Mundas, only attacking other Christians who were "supporters or agents" of foreign powers. The movement soon spread to Khunti, Tamar, Basia, and Ranchi.

As the movement spread, the British finally managed to capture Birsa on February 3, 1900, in Jamkopai Forest. As many as 460 tribals were also arrested for the protest. But for Birsa, only 25 at the time, the struggle for freedom came to an end on June 9 when he died inside the prison awaiting trial.

After his death, his religion and movement slowly faded. But his actions left a lasting legacy. The colonial government introduced the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act (CNT act) in 1908, which prevented the transfer of land from tribals to non-tribals. The act is still listed in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution, putting it beyond the purview of judicial review and recall.

## Modern Image

Birsa is often mentioned by Hindutva advocates and groups for his attacks against missionaries, Christians, and Christianised Mundas. But Birsa's attacks were not against the religion for the sake of protecting Hinduism, as evident by the establishment of the Birsait faith. Birsa's movement, attacks and teachings were to protect the fragile tribal identity and culture against the oppressive system of the colonial state, and the actions of missionaries and upper-caste jagirs, thikadars and zamindars against the tribal communities.

## The present-day politics

The BJP-led government has been accused of co-opting tribal icons in order to woo the tribal communities. Along with the announcement of the Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas, the government announced the change in the name of Habibganj Railway station in Bhopal to Rani Kamalapati Railway station, after one of the last Gond queens of the area.

"The BJP is trying to derive political mileage in the name of Birsa Munda," said senior Congress leader Digvijaya Singh. Singh claimed that the party spent over Rs 12 crore on the event.

The name change and the recognition of Birsa are seen as the BJP's mega outreach programme to bring tribals back into the fold, especially in Madhya Pradesh. Tribal communities make up 21.08 percent of the state's 7.26 crore population and 47 Assembly seats in the 230-member House are reserved for Scheduled Tribes, and account for at least 50,000 votes each in 35 other Assembly seats.

The BJP had defeated Singh in 2003, largely in part to a massive 'Hindu Conference' held in Jhabua which was attended by 2 lakh tribals. The BJP government had finally lost its mandate in 2018, before Jyotiraditya Scindia, a scion of the last Maharaja of Gwalior. Later, Scindia along with his loyal MPs switched sides allowing BJP to come back to power in 2020.