

Research Vidyapith International Multidisciplinary Journal



(International Open Access, Peer-reviewed & Refereed Journal)

(Multidisciplinary, Monthly, Multilanguage)

* Vol-2* *Issue-10 (Special Issue)* *October 2025*

The Role of Women in Tribal Movements: Birsa Munda's Influence

Moromi Hajong

Research Scholar, Department of Education, BabasahebBhimraoAmbedkar University Lucknow

Dr. Lalima

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, BabasahebBhimraoAmbedkar University, Lucknow

Abstract

The role of women in tribal movements has often remained underrepresented, yet their contributions were vital in shaping resistance and social change. During the late 19th century, Birsa Munda emerged as a prominent tribal leader who inspired the Munda community to fight against British colonial rule and exploitative landlords. His movement, known as the Ulgulan (The Great Tumult), not only mobilized tribal men but also encouraged women to participate actively in the struggle. Women played crucial roles as messengers, food suppliers, healers, and even frontline fighters, showing immense courage and resilience. Under Birsa's influence, tribal women became symbols of strength, unity, and cultural preservation. They safeguarded their traditions, supported community gatherings, and motivated others to resist social injustices. Their involvement also challenged the traditional gender roles within their societies, highlighting their potential as agents of change. By empowering both men and women, Birsa Munda's movement created a sense of collective identity and pride among the tribals. Recognizing the contribution of women during this period is essential to understanding the complete narrative of tribal resistance. Their participation not only strengthened the movement but also laid the foundation for women's active role in future tribal struggles.

Keywords: *Tribal women, Birsa Munda, Ulgulan, resistance, empowerment*

1. Introduction

Tribal communities in India have historically been marginalized, with their voices and contributions often overlooked in mainstream historical narratives. Among the many tribal movements during colonial India, the Ulgulan movement led by Birsa Munda stands out as a remarkable episode of resistance against British oppression and exploitative landlords (dikus). While Birsa's leadership has been widely acknowledged, the involvement of tribal women in this movement has not received equal scholarly attention. This paper seeks to explore the significant yet underrepresented role of women in the tribal resistance movement spearheaded by Birsa Munda, analyzing their contributions, challenges, and the transformative impact of their participation on gender roles within tribal society.

2. Objectives of the Study

- i. To examine the historical role of women in BirsaMunda'sUlgulan movement.
- ii. To analyze how their participation reshaped gender norms within tribal society.
- iii. To explore the legacy of women's involvement for future tribal and ecological movements.
- iv. To link colonial-era exploitation with ongoing challenges of land alienation, displacement, and environmental injustice.
- v. To compare women's roles in Ulgulan with other tribal and ecological movements in India.

3. Review of Related Literature

The role of women in tribal movements has drawn limited scholarly attention, often overshadowed by the focus on male leaders or broader structural causes of resistance. However, a growing body of literature highlights both BirsaMunda's legacy and the underexplored contributions of women. The following review categorizes the scholarship into four broad themes: (i) leadership and legacy of BirsaMunda, (ii) gender and participation in tribal struggles, (iii) socio-economic and cultural dimensions of colonial disruption, and (iv) comparative perspectives on women in resistance movements.

Leadership and Legacy of BirsaMunda

Several scholars have emphasized BirsaMunda's leadership as a turning point in tribal resistance during colonial India. Kumar (2017) portrays Birsa as a symbol of tribal nationalism, highlighting his dual role as a religious reformer and political leader. Devalle (1992) and Xaxa (2008) analyze how Birsa mobilized his people against both economic exploitation and cultural erosion, making him an enduring figure of Adivasi pride. Bara (2022) critiques mainstream historiography for portraying tribals as primitive rebels rather than conscious political actors, urging recognition of Adivasi agency in shaping anti-colonial struggles. Sannyasi, Samanta, and Halim (2023) further explore Birsa's role in cultural revival, noting his attempts to modernize traditional practices while reinforcing ethnic pride. These works collectively affirm Birsa's significance but often sideline the parallel contributions of women within the same movement.

Gender and Participation in Tribal Struggles

A smaller but growing strand of scholarship focuses explicitly on the role of women. Singh (2024) highlights women like **Maki Munda**, who participated actively in the Ulgulan, challenging both colonial authority and patriarchal biases within Adivasi society. Barwar and Minj (2025) similarly document women's roles in 19th-century Jharkhand uprisings, showing how they organized secret networks, spied on colonial officials, and supported rebels despite facing brutal repercussions. Sawai and Jadhav (2024), through their analysis of Mahasweta Devi's *ChotiMunda and His Arrow*, emphasize the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and class in shaping women's contributions to resistance. They argue that women often functioned as cultural custodians and active resisters, whose sacrifices remain undervalued in both colonial and nationalist narratives. Together, these works challenge male-centric accounts and demonstrate that women were indispensable to tribal resistance, though their recognition remains limited.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Disruptions under Colonialism

Colonial exploitation forms the backdrop against which women's contributions can be better understood. Kerketta and Mohapatra (2024) examine how British policies—such as the disruption of the *Khuntkatti* system, forest laws, and missionary

interventions—eroded traditional socio-economic structures in Chotanagpur, intensifying discontent. Azad and Kumar (2025) highlight economic exploitation through land alienation, forced labor (*bethbegari*), and taxation, which directly affected tribal households and increased women’s vulnerability. Bhattacharya and Murmu (2019) add an anthropological dimension by studying women’s dual roles in household and economic production among Santals, Mundas, and Hos. They argue that women historically enjoyed high status due to their subsistence contributions, but this was undermined by colonial disruptions that devalued their labor. These studies underline how women bore the brunt of structural changes while simultaneously sustaining community resilience through cultural and economic roles.

Comparative Perspectives on Women’s Resistance

Some scholars have attempted to situate women’s roles in Ulgulan within broader comparative contexts. Bramhane (2024) underscores how tribal movements across India—whether against marginalization or cultural erosion—depended on women’s contributions to community resilience. Bhagat and Gupta (2025) link tribal heritage, including women’s cultural roles, to contemporary narratives of Atmanirbhar Bharat, situating Birsa Munda’s legacy within present-day empowerment frameworks. Parashar (2025) broadens the scope by documenting various tribal leaders such as TilkaManjhi, Tirot Singh, and JatraBhagat, but also notes that women’s sacrifices often remain invisible in national narratives of freedom. These comparative works highlight a recurring pattern: women were active participants in tribal uprisings across regions and periods, yet historical memory continues to marginalize them.

4. Research Gap

From the existing studies, a few gaps can be identified. First, while many researchers have written about BirsaMunda’s leadership, very few have focused on the significant roles and leadership of women in the Ulgulan movement. Second, although some works discuss women, they often describe them only as helpers rather than as central actors who shaped the struggle. Finally, the connection between the problems faced by tribals during Birsa’s time—such as land loss, exploitation, and cultural disruption—and the challenges tribal women face today, including displacement and environmental damage, has not been studied in detail.

5. Historical Background: Colonial Exploitation and Tribal Resistance

The late 19th century was a period of intense socio-economic upheaval for tribal communities in the Chotanagpur region (present-day Jharkhand). British colonial policies disrupted traditional landholding systems, imposed heavy taxes, and allowed the entry of moneylenders and landlords who exploited the tribals. These conditions gave rise to widespread discontent and several tribal uprisings. It was within this context that Birsa Munda emerged as a charismatic leader who called upon his people to reclaim their land, culture, and dignity.

6. BirsaMunda and the Ulgulan Movement

Birsa Munda (1875–1900) became a symbol of tribal resistance. His Ulgulan movement (1899–1900) aimed at establishing Munda Raj (self-rule) and ending British dominance. Birsa’s message combined spiritual revivalism with political resistance, urging tribals to return to their indigenous faith (Birsait) and resist the exploitative practices of landlords. Under his influence, thousands of tribal men and women rose in revolt, challenging colonial authority and asserting their cultural identity.

7. Role of Women in the Ulgulan Movement

Active Participation in Resistance

Women participated as messengers, carrying secret communications between rebel groups, and supplied food, water, and shelter to fighters. Some even took up arms, defending their villages from British troops and landlords' mercenaries. Their courage and resilience made them integral to the success of the movement.

Supportive and Cultural Roles

Apart from combat support, women maintained community morale. They performed traditional songs and dances to inspire unity, took care of the wounded as healers, and safeguarded children and the elderly during attacks. By continuing cultural practices amidst turmoil, they ensured the survival of tribal heritage.

Challenging Gender Norms

Traditionally confined to domestic roles, women's active involvement disrupted existing gender hierarchies within tribal society. Their visible presence in public protests and combat symbolized empowerment and sowed the seeds for future gender equality within tribal movements.

8. Impact of Women's Involvement

Strengthened the Movement

Women were not just passive supporters but active contributors in tribal uprisings like Birsa Munda's movement. They provided crucial **logistical support**—arranging food, shelter, and safe communication networks—which allowed the rebels to sustain their resistance against the British for longer periods. Women also offered **moral support**, encouraging men to remain committed even during periods of fear, fatigue, or uncertainty. This collective involvement ensured that the movement was not just the responsibility of men but a **shared community effort**, making it more resilient and far-reaching.

Cultural Preservation

Colonial authorities often attempted to weaken tribal unity by suppressing indigenous practices, rituals, and festivals. Women, as custodians of **oral traditions, songs, dances, and religious rituals**, played a central role in preserving these cultural elements. By maintaining practices such as festivals, folk songs, and community gatherings, women helped keep alive the **tribal worldview and spiritual identity**, which strengthened the moral backbone of the movement. Their role ensured that the fight against colonial oppression was also a **fight for cultural survival**, not just political freedom.

Social Transformation

Traditionally, many tribal societies were patriarchal, with leadership roles dominated by men. Women's **visible and courageous participation** in the movement challenged these gender hierarchies. Their involvement in protests, rituals, and organizational work broke stereotypes and **redefined women's position** in the community. This created a shift in attitudes, where women began to be seen as partners in decision-making rather than silent followers. In the long run, this participation **inspired respect for women's voices** and gradually transformed social norms within tribal societies.

Legacy of Empowerment

The contribution of women in the movement did not end with its immediate outcomes. Their participation created a **legacy of empowerment**, inspiring later generations of tribal and peasant women to take part in struggles across India. Movements like the Santhal Rebellion, Tebhaga Movement, and Chipko Movement saw women emerging as key leaders and participants. This continuity highlights how

women's involvement in Birsa's movement laid the foundation for **along tradition of female activism**, ensuring that tribal resistance remained an inclusive and gender-conscious force.

9. Challenges Faced by Tribal Women

Physical Violence and Exploitation

Tribal women were among the most vulnerable targets of colonial repression. During uprisings, British forces and landlords often subjected them to **physical assaults, harassment, and brutal punishments** in order to intimidate the community and crush resistance. Women who were suspected of aiding rebels—by supplying food, hiding fugitives, or spreading messages—were frequently assaulted, imprisoned, or subjected to humiliating punishments, leaving deep scars on their lives and communities.

Social Stigma and Gender Barriers

By stepping out of traditional domestic roles and joining public protests, women challenged patriarchal norms within their own communities. However, this often invited criticism, suspicion, and stigma. Some men resisted women's active involvement, fearing it disrupted traditional gender hierarchies. Women had to constantly negotiate between community expectations and revolutionary commitment, which added an emotional and social burden to their struggle.

Family and Economic Insecurity

Participation in the movement often meant risking the safety of their families. Many women saw their husbands, brothers, or sons imprisoned, killed, or driven into hiding. With men absent, women were left to manage households, farms, and children under extremely hostile conditions. The colonial state frequently carried out land seizures, forced labor, and eviction, making survival even harder for women, who had to bear the double responsibility of fighting oppression and keeping their families alive.

Erasure from History

Despite their courage and sacrifices, tribal women's stories have often been marginalized in historical narratives. Colonial records ignored them, nationalist histories rarely highlighted them, and even community accounts sometimes downplayed their contributions. This erasure not only robbed them of recognition but also made their struggles invisible to future generations, reinforcing the idea that resistance was primarily a male-driven effort—when in fact women were equally crucial.

10. Comparative Insights

The participation of women in Birsa Munda's Ulgulan movement was not an isolated phenomenon but part of a larger historical pattern in which tribal and rural women across India emerged as crucial agents of resistance. By comparing Ulgulan with other movements, such as the Santhal Rebellion and the Chipko Movement, the continuity of women's agency across time becomes evident. These comparative insights reveal that women consistently acted as defenders of land, culture, and community, even when mainstream historical accounts downplayed their roles.

Women in the Santhal Rebellion (1855–56)

The Santhal Rebellion, which erupted in present-day Jharkhand and Bihar, was one of the earliest large-scale uprisings against British colonial exploitation and oppressive landlords. Like the Ulgulan, it emerged from grievances over land alienation, excessive taxation, and loss of cultural autonomy. Historical records, as well as oral

traditions, acknowledge that Santhal women were active participants. They not only motivated their male counterparts but also fought alongside them, armed with bows, arrows, and traditional weapons. Women served as strategists, couriers, and providers of food and shelter. Their visible presence in combat challenged colonial stereotypes that depicted tribal women as passive or subordinate. The Santhal women's courage resonates strongly with the experiences of Munda women during the Ulgulan, underscoring a shared tradition of gender-inclusive resistance in tribal struggles.

Women in the Chipko Movement (1970s)

More than a century after the Ulgulan, rural women once again rose to prominence in the Chipko Movement of the 1970s in Uttarakhand. Faced with deforestation, ecological degradation, and loss of livelihoods, women physically embraced trees to prevent their felling by contractors. Their participation was not only an act of environmental protection but also a defense of subsistence rights, as forests provided fuel, fodder, and water essential for their families' survival. The leadership of women like Gaura Devi highlighted how women's ecological knowledge and daily dependence on natural resources positioned them as frontline defenders of the environment. Much like the women in Birsa's Ulgulan, the women of Chipko linked cultural survival with ecological preservation, demonstrating that women's resistance is both a social and environmental act.

Women in the Narmada Bachao Andolan (1980s–2000s)

The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) emerged in the 1980s against large-scale dam projects on the Narmada River that threatened to displace thousands of tribal and rural families. Women played a pivotal role in the movement, bringing both moral authority and grassroots strength. Figures such as **Medha Patkar** became iconic leaders, but equally important were the countless tribal and peasant women who organized protests, hunger strikes, and sit-ins to protect their land, water, and cultural heritage. For many of these women, the struggle was deeply personal, as displacement meant not only loss of livelihood but also erasure of ancestral connections to the land. Their participation linked gender justice with environmental and developmental debates, echoing the same themes of land protection and cultural survival seen in Ulgulan.

Continuities Across Movements

Although separated by time and context, the Ulgulan, Santhal Rebellion, and Chipko Movement all reveal common threads:

- **Women as Cultural Custodians:** In all three movements, women preserved songs, rituals, and oral traditions, reinforcing collective identity in the face of external oppression.
- **Women as Defenders of Land and Livelihood:** Whether resisting British landlords or forest contractors, women's struggles consistently centered on the protection of land, forests, and natural resources.
- **Challenging Gender Norms:** By moving beyond domestic roles into leadership, protest, and combat, women redefined their position in society and inspired future generations.

Broader Implications

The comparison illustrates that women's involvement in resistance movements cannot be dismissed as incidental; it is a structural feature of struggles for justice and survival in tribal and rural India. Women's activism has historically bridged the gap between political resistance and ecological consciousness, creating holistic movements that defend both people and the environment. The legacy of Birsa Munda's Ulgulan, therefore, is not confined to the past but resonates in later movements where women once again stood at the forefront, redefining both gender and resistance.

11. Conclusion

Women played a crucial role in the tribal movements inspired by Birsa Munda. In the Ulgulan movement, they showed that resistance was not just the work of men but a joint struggle where women were also key contributors. Acknowledging their contributions provides a more complete and inclusive understanding of tribal history. It also underscores the transformative potential of women's participation in socio-political struggles, inspiring future generations to continue the pursuit of equality and justice.

Author's Declaration:

I/We, the author(s)/co-author(s), declare that the entire content, views, analysis, and conclusions of this article are solely my/our own. I/We take full responsibility, individually and collectively, for any errors, omissions, ethical misconduct, copyright violations, plagiarism, defamation, misrepresentation, or any legal consequences arising now or in the future. The publisher, editors, and reviewers shall not be held responsible or liable in any way for any legal, ethical, financial, or reputational claims related to this article. All responsibility rests solely with the author(s)/co-author(s), jointly and severally. I/We further affirm that there is no conflict of interest financial, personal, academic, or professional regarding the subject, findings, or publication of this article.

References

1. Singh, A. (2024). Birsa's Ulgulan: Unsung Female Heroes of a Popular Revolt. *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies (JAIS)*.14(1). 2394-5524.
2. Bramhane, A. (2024). Role of Tribal Movements in Shaping the Identity of Tribal Communities in India. *Akshara Multidisciplinary Research Journal*.4(14). 2582-5429.
3. Sannyasi, N., et.al. (2023). A Research Study on Birsa Munda: The great personality and the Indian tribal freedom fighter. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies*.5(2). 2664-8660.
4. Barwar, S. S. & Minj, S. C. (2025). Women in Tribal Movements of Jharkhand during British Rule. *Multidisciplinary, Multi-Lingual, Peer Reviewed Open Access Journal*. 3(1). 3048-6971.
5. Azad, S. P. & Kumar, S. (2025). Economic Exploitation And Resistance: Birsa Munda's Fight Against Feudal And Colonial Systems. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*.13(2). 2320-2882.
6. Sawai, P. B. & Jadhav, S. D. (2024). The Role of Women in Tribal Resistance: A Perspective from Choti Munda and his Arrow. *International Journal of Progressive Research in Engineering Management and Science (IJPREMS)*.4(12). 2583-1062.
7. Kerketta, A. K. & Mahapatra, S. (2024). Traditional, Resistance and Change: The Socio-Cultural Life of Munda Tribes in Chota Nagpur under British Rule. *Asia Pacific Journal of Research in Business Management*.15(11). 2229-4104.
8. Bhattacharya, S. & Murmu, S. C. (2019). Women in Tribal Society: Balancing Multiple Roles in a Family. *Journal of Cultural and Social Anthropology*.1(4). 2642-8237.
9. Bara, J. (2022). Birsa Munda and the Nation. *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Study (JAIS)*.12(2). 2394-5524.
10. Bhagat, H. & Gupta, S. (2025). The Importance of Indigenous Tribal Heritage Commemorating Birsa Munda's Legacy. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)*.7(4). 2582-2160.
11. The Legend of Birsa Munda: A Saga of Courage and Sacrifice. NCERT.

Cite this Article

'Moromi Hajong; Dr.Lalima', "The Role of Women in Tribal Movements: Birsa Munda's Influence", Research Vidyapith International Multidisciplinary Journal (RVIMJ), ISSN: 3048-7331 (Online), Volume:2, Issue:10 (Special Issue), October 2025.

Journal URL- <https://www.researchvidyapith.com/>

Published Date- 31 October 2025