


Introduction: Who Was Birsa Munda?

- In 1895, a tribal leader named Birsa was seen roaming forests and villages of Chotanagpur (Jharkhand).
- People believed he had magical powers: could cure disease, multiply grain.
- He declared he was sent by God to free his people from the slavery of the dikus (outsiders).
- Tribals like the Mundas, Santhals, and Oraons followed him.
- They were unhappy with British rule, land loss, and changes to their religion and way of life.



 Fig. 1 – Women of Dongria Kandha tribe crossing river to reach the market

How Did Tribal Groups Live?

By the 19th century, different tribal groups lived in various ways:

Some Practised Shifting Cultivation (Jhum Cultivation)

- Also called slash-and-burn agriculture
- Forests were cleared by cutting treetops and burning vegetation
- Ash spread to fertilise soil (contains potash)
- Soil scratched using hoe; seeds scattered (not ploughed)
- After harvest, land left fallow for years

 Definition: Fallow – Unused land left to regain fertility


 Definition: Jhum Cultivation – Shifting farming on forested hills



 Fig. 2 – Dongria Kandha women carrying leaves to make plates

✓ Common in North-East and Central India forests

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2 Some Were Hunters & Gatherers

- Tribes like the Khonds (in Orissa) hunted and collected forest products
 - Fruits, roots, flowers (kusum, palash), seeds (sal, mahua)
 - Sold in local markets; also used for medicine, food, and dyeing
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◆ Example: Baigas of Central India refused to work as labourers — believed in living only off the forest

📘 Belief: It was below Baiga dignity to work for wages

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3 Some Herded Animals

- Tribes like Van Gujjars (Punjab hills), Labadis (Andhra), Gaddis (Kulu), Bakarwals (Kashmir) were pastoralists
- Moved with animals seasonally to find grass and water



 Fig. 3 – Map showing location of tribal groups in India

4 Some Took to Settled Cultivation

- Some tribals began farming the same land year after year
- Used ploughs and claimed ownership rights
- Among Mundas, land often belonged to entire clan
- Some members gained power, became chiefs; others worked for them

 **Definition: Clan – Group of families with common ancestors**

British View:

- Tribes like Gonds and Santhals (settled) were called “more civilised”
- Forest dwellers were called “savage” and needed to be tamed

How Did Colonial Rule Affect Tribals?

 **What Happened to Tribal Chiefs?**


Before British rule:

- Tribal chiefs had economic + administrative power
- Controlled lands, forests, justice

Under British:

- Allowed to keep land titles
- Lost real authority; had to follow British laws
- Paid tribute and maintained order on British behalf



 Fig. 5 – Nyishi tribe building log huts in Arunachal Pradesh

What Happened to Shifting Cultivators?

British disliked nomadic tribes → wanted them to settle

- Introduced land settlements (measured land, assigned revenue)

 Definition: Settlement – A system of fixing rights over land and tax payment

Problem:

- Jhum farming failed on dry, poor soil
- Yields were low → many returned to shifting methods
- Faced protests → British allowed shifting cultivation in some forests



📷 Fig. 6 – Bhil women cultivating in forest (Gujarat)



📷 Fig. 7 – Tribal workers in rice field (Andhra Pradesh)

🌲 Forest Laws and Their Impact

- British made forests state property
- Declared Reserved Forests: no shifting farming, no hunting or gathering allowed

📖 Definition: Reserved Forests – Protected forests used for timber, no tribal access allowed

Problem:

- Where would tribes work?

Solution:

- British created forest villages

- Gave small plots to tribals inside forests on condition:
→ They must work as cheap labour for the Forest Department

📖 Source 2 – Baiga song (1930s): "To pay forest tax we had to sell buffalo..."



📷 Fig. 8 – Godara women weaving

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💰 Market & Moneylenders: The Role of Dikus

- Traders & sahkars (moneylenders) entered forests
- Tribals began selling goods → took loans → fell into debt

📖 Definition: Dikus – Outsiders who exploited tribal communities (moneylenders, traders, landlords)

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◆ Example: Silk growers in Hazaribagh (Jharkhand)

- Santhals reared cocoons → agents bought at ₹3-4/1000 cocoons
- Traders sold them at 5× profit
- Tribals got little income → saw traders as enemies



 Fig. 9 – Hajang woman weaving mats with baby on back

Tribals in Tea Gardens and Mines

- 19th century: Tea plantations and coal mining expanded
- Contractors hired tribal labour for Assam tea gardens & Bihar coal mines
- Wages were low; they couldn't return home



 Fig. 10 – Coal miners of Bihar (1948)

Rebellion and Resistance

From 1831 to 1940, tribals across India rebelled:

Year	Region	Rebellion
1831–32	Chotanagpur	Kol Uprising
1855	Jharkhand	Santhal Revolt
1910	Bastar (Chhattisgarh)	Bastar Rebellion
1940	Maharashtra	Warli Revolt

☀ Birsa Munda and the Vision of a Golden Age

- 👤 Birsa born mid-1870s in a poor Munda family
- 🎵 Grew up with forest life, flute music, dance, akhara
- 💡 Heard stories of past rebellions and ancestral freedom
- 🎓 Went to missionary school
- 🕉 Also learned from a Vaishnav preacher
- Believed in purity, hard work, discipline

📖 Definition: Vaishnav – A follower of Lord Vishnu

🎯 Birsa's Movement:

- Urged people to:
 - Stop drinking liquor
 - Clean villages
 - Reject witchcraft and sorcery
- Believed in satyug (golden past):
 - Peaceful, honest farming life
 - Respect for land and nature

📖 Source 3 – Munda song: “Blood trickles from my shoulders...”

📄 Political Aim:

- Remove missionaries, saukars, landlords, British
- Establish Munda Raj with Birsa as leader
- Symbol: White flag of Birsa Raj

✂ Followers attacked:

- Police stations
- Churches
- Property of zamindars and moneylenders

 17 1900: Birsa died of cholera → movement ended

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✓ Impact of Birsa Movement:

- 1 British introduced laws to protect tribal land from being taken by dikus
- 2 Proved that tribal people could organise and fight colonial exploitation in their own way

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Important Definitions

Term	Meaning
Diku	Outsider exploiting tribals (e.g., trader, moneylender)
Fallow	Uncultivated land left to regain fertility
Jhum	Shifting cultivation
Clan	A group of related families
Vaishnav	Devotee of Vishnu
Reserved Forest	Forest protected by government
Settlement	Land revenue system under British

