



Birsa Munda: His Life and the Indigenous Question in Contemporary Times

JANJATIYA GAURAV (TRIBAL PRIDE) SEMINAR

IN COLLABORATION WITH INDIAN COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi, 21-22 August 2025

Concept Note:

Accounts of Birsa Munda's life continue to be relayed through a convergence of history, myth, and literature. His story disrupts the historiographical claim to objectivity, exposing the narrativity underpinning historical representation, while also critiquing the literary tendency to aestheticise subaltern lives. His legacy, mediated through oral traditions such as songs, rituals, and folktales, also resists textual closure. As Walter Benjamin suggests in "The Storyteller," oral traditions privilege collective memory and relationality over the atomised subject of modernity, and Birsa's presence in these performative traditions embodies resistance to colonial epistemic and material dispossession.

The *Ulgulan* (Great Rebellion) led by Birsa also exemplifies a posthumanist resistance that sought to restore an Adivasi nurtured relationality, disrupted by colonial modernity. This movement was not confined to armed struggle but also reasserted itself through tribal cosmologies and practices. In this, Birsa's rebellion underscores the cultural and spiritual dimensions of decolonisation, offering critical insights for contemporary movements advocating environmental justice and indigenous rights. Birsa's story and the broader Adivasi struggle illuminate possible ways of dismantling colonial legacies, advancing decolonial futures that honour multiplicity, relationality, and resistance. These efforts contribute to reimagining a more equitable and sustainable world beyond the exploitative logic of extractive modernity.

With the Adivasi discourse emerging with increasing prominence in contemporary debates on identity, indigeneity, and development, both globally and within India, there is an urgent need for a critical engagement with concepts of indigeneity and *Adivasiyat* through the lens of decolonisation. Colonial rule subjected Adivasis to systemic displacement, marginalisation, and cultural erasure. At its core, colonialism sought resource extraction—primarily land, minerals, and labour—while dispossessing Adivasis of ancestral lands and undermining their social, political, and spiritual practices. Colonial ideologies, such as terra nullius and the civilised/savage dichotomy, legitimised this exploitation, further entrenching inequalities and denying Adivasis autonomy. Decolonisation for Adivasis, however, transcends political independence—it involves reclaiming land, identity, cultural sovereignty, and self-governance—elements deeply intertwined with their spiritual and cultural existence. Land is not merely a material asset; its loss through colonial violence disrupted

Adivasi ways of life, making land sovereignty central to their struggle for self-determination. This reclamation is essential to restoring the interconnectedness disrupted by colonial modernity.

Decolonisation also demands the transformation of educational systems to reflect indigenous values, languages, and pedagogies. Introduced by British missionaries, formal education for Adivasis imposed Western-centric ideologies while marginalising practices of indigenous knowledge systems. These systems, rooted in relationality and iterative practices, were seen as opposing the linear temporality of modernity. For Adivasis, decolonisation is not a singular event but a continuous process closely linked with broader global movements for justice, including racial equality, environmental protection, and land rights. Literary studies also provide a critical approach to examine these struggles, offering nuanced insights into how narratives, symbols, and aesthetics shape the ongoing process of decolonisation.

Through this two-day conference, we aim to engage an interdisciplinary network of scholars, practitioners, lawyers, activists, and artists in a productive dialogue on these urgent issues. By deepening our understanding of the complexities of the Adivasi struggle, we hope to contribute to a more inclusive and just decolonisation framework that honours the rights, dignity, and autonomy of indigenous peoples worldwide.

Through various thematic areas related to the Adivasi discourse, we are interested in theoretically informed and empirically rigorous papers on themes including, but not limited to, the following:

- > **Birsa Munda: Historical Icon and Literary Symbol of Resistance**
- > **Political Decolonisation: Reclaiming Land Sovereignty and Self-Governance**
- > **Cultural Decolonisation: Revitalising Indigenous Knowledge Systems**
- > **Resources and Environmental Justice: Posthumanist Reclamations of Ecology and Identity**
- > **Decolonisation as a Continuous Struggle: Adivasi Movements and Global Solidarity**
- > **Adivasi Women and Decolonisation: Voices of Resistance and Agency**
- > **Oral Legacies of Resistance: The Role of Storytelling in Adivasi Movements**
- > **Literary Studies and Decolonisation: Theoretical Approaches to Adivasi Resistance**

We welcome early-career researchers, faculty, postdoctoral scholars, and graduate students, and we especially encourage individuals from traditionally underrepresented groups to apply.

Please send your application via email to praveen@svc.du.ac.in. Your email should include: A short abstract (maximum 300 words) and a bio note (maximum 200 words). We will provide a minimum travel grant to presenters who are unable to secure grants from other sources, as well as accommodation for outstation presenters for the duration of the seminar.

Important Dates:

- **Deadline for applications:** 25 June 2025
- **Notification of acceptance:** No later than 5 July 2025
- **Complete paper submission:** 25 July 2025

Organising Committee:

Dr Praveen Verma, Prof Rina Ramdev, Ms Rajbir Kaur, Ms N Tejaswini, Mr Aman Nawaz, Mr Nishant

