subalternity as ethnicity: a study of aranyer adhikar

Chapter II

Subalternity as Ethnicity: A Study of Aranyer Adhikar

For many years, the tribals of Chottanagpur, as of the other parts of India, have been incessantly exploited and subjugated. Tribals are considered the primitive segment of Indian society. They live in forests and hills without having more than a casual contact with the so-called civilized world. The tribal unrest and uprisings in colonial and postcolonial India were the swelling consequence of many contributory factors. In the past, there were no attempt to penetrate their regions and to impose alien values and beliefs on them. But with the expansion of British colonialism in India, the pattern of tribal life underwent a drastic change. This expansion was compounded with a proliferating intrusion of the outsiders into the tribal belts. The colonial administration came in conflict with the tribal societies in India from the beginning of the nineteenth century itself when they annexed tribal land and introduced British administration in Tribal areas. They tried to consolidate their position in the country by bringing all the regions, including the tribal areas, into a single administrative unit. The disintegration of rural order due to the imposition of the zamindari system of land tenure on tribal areas has evoked strong response among the tribals of Chottanagpur. The Chottanagpur area is a hilly region known for its abundant forest and mineral wealth. A lion’s part of India’s coal, iron, steel, mica and copper is taken from this area. But the natural riches of their homelands have been ransacked without any benefits trickling down to its inhabitants. The natural wealth of
the area stridently contrasts with the extreme vulnerable condition of the tribal communities who inhabit Chottanagpur.

The continuing exploitation of the natural resources of the tribal homelands has resulted in the extensive disintegration of the indigenous economy of the tribals. In addition, the increasing process of modernization and industrialization intensified their pathetic condition further. The sudden bourgeoning of industries in the Chottanagpur region has transformed the tribal-peasant economy drastically, which had already started to crumble with the incursion of non-tribal traders and money lenders to the region. While the disadvantage of the tribals at the organizational and social level hindered them from moving forward, politically and socially, the influx of non-tribal people and the conditions of economic stagnation and semi-feudal exploitation constantly coerced them to attack the system which was responsible for these conditions. All these forms of incapacitating conditions have given rise to a series of organized struggles in last two centuries, especially in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Time and again the tribals of India have protested against the exploitative system. The rebellions of Santals, Kols and Mundas in the nineteenth century, the Tana Bhagat and the Jharkhand movements in the twentieth century, to name a few, were all attempts by the tribal people to free themselves from the shackles of exploitation and to regain their customary rights over their homelands. Birsa Munda’s Ugulan, which marks the culmination of the repeated rebellions took place in colonial period, has been considered the most important among
them -- for both its volume and degree. This revolt led by Birsa Munda forms the focal point of Mahasweta Devi’s *Aranyer Adhikar*. The continuing influx of the outsiders to the geo-cultural spheres of the tribals has led to the destabilization of their indigenous social order, affecting their very survival -- both in physical and cultural terms. This process had far reaching impact on the tribal society and their discontent surfaced in the form of numerous uprisings and movements. All these issues figure in Mahasweta’s *Aranyer Adhikar*. Tracing the multifarious reasons that led to the counter insurgencies from the part of the tribals during the colonial period Kaushik Ghosh observes:

There were repeated and numerous rebellion till the very end of the nineteenth century against the displacement and transformations of such large numbers of people. But the colonial army, despite the occasional defeat, crushed these revolts and killed, deported and imprisoned large numbers of the rebels. Thus, the Ho, Munda, Oraon, Bhumij, Santal and Paharia peoples -- the raiding hillmen who so terrified others and remained autonomous of the people of the plains -- increasingly lost the autonomy that they had maintained at the time of their initial colonization (13).

Birsa’s *Ulgulan*, which actually charters the culmination of a series of tribal uprising that started from the latter half of the nineteenth century up to its closing years, was agrarian in its basis, violent in nature and political in
content. Significantly enough, as an immediate consequence of his rebellion, the Chottanagpur Tenancy Act was passed in 1908. The colonial regime was accustomed to revise some of its anti-tribal laws. Furthermore, it has inspired many other tribal movements of resistance like the Jharkhand Movement.

The rebellion of Birsa Munda in 1899 gained much prominence in the field of subaltern politics in colonial India. Until a few decades back, the social initiatives and resistance of the tribals and peasants in colonial India were either concealed or marginalized by the standardized historic narrative of the country. Only a couple of decades back the historians of India recouped a substantial range of local resistance of the subaltern peoples to the hegemonic forces that sought to silence them. Consequently, a large number of subaltern counteractions, though fragmented and local in range, came to be excavated by the champions of different schools of alternative historiographies like Subaltern Studies and History from Below so on. The histories of Birsa rebellion in 1899, the Santal Hul of 1885 and the Sardar Mulkuyi in 1895, to name a few, have unveiled fresh perspective into the alternative strand of Indian politics.

Mahasweta’s *Aranyer Adhikar* provides an authentic document about the socio-cultural problems experienced by the Mundas of Chottanagpur during the colonial period. *Aranyer Adhikar*, her first novel to deal with the issue of the tribals, ostensibly deals with the experiences of manipulation to which the tribal community had fallen. Placing Birsa Munda, a historical figure, at the centre of the text, Mahasweta has traced his life history from the
early childhood to his death in Ranchi prison due to police atrocities, at the
beginning of twentieth century. The text, besides recounting the Munda
uprising of 1899, provides an insider vision about the life and culture of the
Mundas with all its specifications. Besides the meticulous research which was
conducted before writing the text, her long experience among the tribal
people as an activist has helped her to give maximum authenticity to the
narration of Birsa Munda’s life and rebellion. At the same time, it can be seen
that, she has taken some freedom with the historical facts, without fictionizing
and reducing its authenticity, with the plot construction as well as the
character formation. She has used folklores, oral history, colonial archives,
official documents and records of legal proceeding so on to reconstruct the life
of Birsa Munda. Mahasweta has done thorough investigation into the life and
struggles of Birsa Munda before she wrote Aranyer Adhikar. In the text she
provides, based on the historical documents, the surfacing of Birsa as an
undisputed leader of the Mundas.

The rising of the Mundas in 1899 under the leadership of Birsa
constituted an indictment only of the local colonial administration but of
colonialism itself. The story begins with the imprisonment and death of Birsa
Munda in Ranchi jail in 1900. Then it goes back to Birsa’s past life and the
making of him as a leader. At the Ranchi prison, Birsa is shown to be thinking
about the dire destitution of his people. His mind, was preoccupied with the
thoughts of the survival of his people: “[H]e sees everything in front of his
eyes, as if in a picture. In the life of Mundas rice is only a dream. Their food is
another thing — ghato, the gruel made of china grass. It has become a dream for them. Birsa has always fought for rice. His slogan too was not different: why should the Munda keep on living by drinking the gruel made of grass? Why can’t they eat rice like others?” (5) Mahasweta addresses the issue of survival at the very outset of the text. It is the question of survival — both at physical and cultural level — which forced the Mundas to take the recourse of arms against their oppressors. Significantly enough, the issue of survival provides Aranyer Adhikar a thematic connectivity with her other subaltern works like Rudali and The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh. After recounting the “clinical murder” of Birsa in Ranchi jail by the colonial administration and the response it created among his people, the text attempts to trace back the experiences and events that ultimately led to Birsa’s taking up of the leadership as well as the ground works of the Munda revolt. The death of Birsa, though it signifies the culmination of a series of events connected with Ulgulan, doesn’t mark the termination of his revolution. Birsa’s earlier life was narrated mainly through two agencies. Largely, it is reconstructed through the memories of the Mundas. In addition, it is unveiled through the direct authorial narration.

It is in the forms of the memories of Dhani Munda, the veteran rebel, most of the episodes of Birsa’s life have been reconstructed. It is significant that Dhani’s narration of Birsa’s life starts with the description of their community history. He narrates when and how the influx of the non-tribals into their geo-cultural milieu started and how they responded by resisting
through different rebellions like *Hool* and *Mulkuyi*. He told them how the Mundas came to settle in Chottaganpur and the region was named after their forefathers Chuttiyaharam and Nagu. The tribal history narrated by Dhani reveals that the tribal people were an independent and progressive society before the intrusion and entrenchment of colonialism: “[T]hey were happier then. They used to go to the forest for hunting. They made fields for farming. They had their own god -- Singbhonga.”(26) The narration of oral history which is characteristic of Mahasweta’s subaltern novels is apparent in Dhani’s narration of the Munda history to his fellow prisoners in Ranchi jail. He told them about the independent and happy life in the past and how it came to be disturbed with the incursion of the dikhus, the intruders. Reiteration, a devise essential to oral story telling, is deployed by Dhani. By deploying this narrative strategy, Mahasweta has placed the individual experience of Birsa at the intersection of tribal history, thereby seeking to narrate and contextualize the formation of his subjectivity along with the social forces shaping it. This oral narration of tribal history is relevant, because it traces the metamorphosis of the Mundas from an autonomous and independent community to an incarcerated one. Besides, it implicates the counter possibilities of altering the present condition by organized struggles.

Birsa’s earlier life was narrated against the background of the increasing marginalization and oppression to which the tribal people were subjected during the colonial regime. With the influx of money lenders, zamindars, missionaries, traders and government officers, the aged pattern of
tribal life underwent a radical change. The lion's part of the land in Chottanagpur went into the hands of the moneylenders and traders and the Mundas became more and more impoverished in the process. Examining how the expansion of British colonialism has intensified the alienation of the tribal people from their socio-economic and cultural moorings Ghosh observes:

With the introduction of alien land tenures, the colonial state dispossessed many hill villages, nobles, chiefs and headmen: it also encouraged rapid growth in the market for land and an extensive money lending business. Alien traders, landlords and administrators at the forefront of the frontier colonial capitalism increasingly controlled the resources, and managed to get the Chottanagpur peasants into enormous debts. The entire system was backed up by an equally alien legal system and a powerful colonial army (13).

All tribal societies were eagerly looking for a redemption from their degrading condition. Strangled by these antagonistic conditions the Mundas were expecting a “saviour”, who would be born among them to liberate them from the fetters of bondage. This deep desire for a leader is illustrated in Dhani’s premonition about a Munda bagvan. Dhani was expecting this miracle since long. As Dipesh Chakraborty aptly points out: “(T)he semiotics of domination and subordination were what the subaltern classes sought to destroy every time they rose up in rebellion. This semiotics could not be separated in the Indian case from what in English we inaccurately refer to
either as "the religious" or "the supernatural." (18) It can be seen that religiosity is inextricably entangled with the rebellion of Birsa, particularly in its manifestation. Dhani and Bharmi, who were the main associates of Birsa in Ulgulan, saw his development as a competent and undisputable leader from a perturbed youngman. Dhani had a presentiment that, Birsa, then a little boy, would become the liberator of the Mundas, who were trampled down by many aggressive forces. He thought that Birsa could reclaim their homeland and culture dispossessed of them. It is evident that all the Mundas, though outwardly sneer at his presage, share this common dream.

Mahasweta historicizes Birsa’s rebellion by locating it within the field of subalterns’ struggles which have been continuing since long. Mundas’ battle against the invaders to their culture and property had already begun. When Birsa was born, the sardars had already commenced their movement against the landlordism and colonial laws which prevented them from entering the forest. Yet, the abject condition of the Mundas continued unabated. Their condition, as the tribals elsewhere, was getting more worse during the colonial system. Their utter destitution is exemplified in the incessant flights of Birsa’s father Sugana Munda from one place to another in search of a livelihood. The extreme poverty forced Sugana Munda to leave his ancestral village, where most of the cultivable land had been forcibly taken away by the moneylenders. Sugana roamed from place to place to eke out a living. Ultimately, he embraced Christianity owing to the pressure exerted by the hostile system. The condition of the other Mundas wasn’t better either.
They moved continuously from one place to other in search of any means of subsistence. Their deep sense of predicament and helplessness is well illustrated in the words of Sugana Munda: “[I]t is not only the Vaishnavas, saints, Christians who were dikhus. Today there are numerous obstacles like court, office, law, tax, rich, interests, lease, slavery, bonded labour.”(47) These words come out of his agonizing apprehension about the numerous forces working around them making their survival -- both at social and cultural level -- increasingly difficult. After many years of straying, Sugana finally settled in Chalker, his maternal ancestor’s village.

Birsa had begun his life like any other Munda child of his time, doing odd jobs like leaves collection, grazing the cattle etc. He used to roam through the jungle alone, often playing his flute. Birsa’s odd tastes and flairs were looked upon by Sugana and Karmi with a tint of fear and anxiety. Even as a young boy, Birsa understood how hard his family strived for its livelihood, and helped it as much as he could. He used to roam the mountainous forests. Roaming through the deep jungle Birsa often felt that the black, virgin, forest-goddess, stretching her both arms and bellowing “[A]ll this land is ours.” (36) Dhani, amazed by Birsa’s deep intimacy with the forest, often followed him. One day, annoyed by Dhani’s continuous pursuing, Birsa told him emphatically that “[T]his is my forest.” (36) Dhani was obviously impressed by this assertive statement. He replied in a sharp voice “[M]ind this. Mind it very well. Today you told that this was your forest.” (36) Since then Dhani kept on stirring Birsa into revolution. Dhani was on tenterhooks about Birsa’s
taking up of the leadership of the Mundas against the war with the government and the landlords. He kept on persuading him to lead the Mundas to revolt against their oppressors. However, Birsa was hesitant and was obviously indifferent to the war ideals of the veteran rebel.

As a child, Birsa longed to learn to read, write and to receive education. He joined the German Mission at Burju, where he had his lower primary education. In 1886, he left for the Mission at Chaibasa where he met Amulya. Experiences at Chaibasa Mission were a turning point in Birsa’s life. While staying at the Chaibasa Mission he asked Amulya: "[W]ill you turn to be a dikhu when you become a great man after getting education? Will you become our enemy? Isn’t so everywhere?"(67) Later, when Amulya became the Deputy Superintendent, he persuasively tried to bring justice for Birsa and his people. Birsa left the Chaibasa Mission and joined the catholic Mission at Tohra. While staying there, he happened to hear about the rebellion of the sardars, the Munda rebels. The rising was brutally suppressed by the British government. The Munda rebels were denied the fundamental human rights in the prison. Some sardars died in the prison even before the trail started. Barrister Jacob, the British lawyer, continued to appear in the court as the counsel of the Mundas, out of his egalitarian views. Birsa was very much disturbed by the ruthless manner the rebellion was crushed by the authorities. It is significant that it was the brutalities meted out to the sardars that triggered the anti-colonial spirit in Birsa.

Birsa was getting more and more disenchanted of the Mission and its
policies. During the Christmas holidays he happened to see Dhani who instigated him by asking to fight their oppressors: "...these dikhus have to be opposed. The white men and the landlords. We have to recover our villages. Mundas villages must go to the Mundas." (70) This time Birsa was willing to hear him. Dhani told him in a tone of urgency: "Birsa, you leave the Mission. Do you know what the white men say? They say Mundas are naked, barbarians, muggers. You leave their Mission, Birsa." (71) Back at the Mission after the Christmas holidays, Birsa had to face certain unexpected events which became crucial in his embracing the path of revolution. His mind was already destabilized after the meeting with Dhani. The other Mundas at the mission reinforced his doubts about Mission's nexus with the district administration. They told him that "[T]he Government and the Mission are same. Mundas are not going to be benefited by them anyway." (71) It was then Father Notrit of Catholic Mission began to show off his racial prejudice against the Mundas. One day, he talked about the Munda rebels in an insulting manner. His deep-rooted racial prejudice surfaced in his presumptuous words: "[T]hese sardars are robbers, plunders and frauds. One must not make company with them." (75) Birsa was deeply hurt by Fr.Notrit's impertinent comment on his people. He is convinced that the sardars "desire the betterment of all Mundas. Otherwise why did they become prisoners? Why did they choose the cruel life of the prison?" (75) Obviously, he could not stand Fr.Notrit's discourteous remarks about the Munda rebels. He asked him in rage: "[W]hat wrong did they do? In what way they cheated you? They are
fighting for and staying in prison for the rights of the Mundas. Are they thieves according to you? Never!" (76)

Since then, Birsa began to address the Mundas students in the Mission. One day, Father Notrit happened to hear Birsa criticizing the Mission and government. He came to understand that he could not restrain the leaving Mundas. He lost his temper and called them cheats: “[A]ll the Mundas are alike. They come to the Mission like beggars. They adore the ideas of sardars in their mind. All the Mundas are ungrateful.” (76) Birsa was obviously taken aback by Father Notrit's presumptuous conduct towards the Mundas. He felt that the government and the missionaries were same. He got completely disenchanted by the church and its ideals. He furiously reminded Father Notrit that the sardars could not be cheats as they were fighting for justice. He started flouting the church. In a sense of total disenchantment he shouted at Fr. Notrit: “[A]ll of you are same -- the government or Mission.” (76) It was followed by a heated exchange of words between Birsa and Father Notrit. Amulya, who was listening to this, tried to prevent Birsa from leaving the Mission. He knew that once Birsa leaves the Mission his dreams of education would never get materialized. As expected, that day Birsa left the Mission for ever. With this, Birsa's education came to a halt. Later, Kali Mukherjee, the magistrate, expresses similar concern, when he tells Amulya that “[H]ad Birsa learnt more they could've got a person to argue for them.” (190) This was a turning point in Birsa's life. Actually, the upsurge of his fury towards Fr. Notrit and the Mission was just a manifestation of the deep sense of
resentment pent up in his mind. His growing regard for the cause of his community which the sardars have been fighting for, coupled with a deep sense of disillusionment about the Mission and colonial education, culminated in an act of retribution. Anyway, this event, though indirectly, resulted in the ascription of divinity upon him.

*Aranyer Adhikar* demonstrates how colonialism attempts to homogenize the polyvocal traditions in the colonies. It presents a comprehensive study of the deracination as well as the psychological impact of colonialism upon the tribal people in India. Colonialism, by means of a set of institutions, virtually bulldozed the cultural practices of the native people in many ways. Mahasweta has dealt with these issues in detail in her collection of activist writings named *Dust on the Road* (1997). The problem of the tribals in the country, according to her, “is not that of getting material support of survival. Mainstream society is carrying on a continuous, shrewd and systematic assault on his social system, his culture, his very tribal identity and existence.” (*Dust on the Road* 109) In addition to the activities of the missionaries, education played a pivotal role in denigrating the culture of the colonized. In India, it was the tribal people who suffered the impact of colonialism in the worst form. It is well exemplified in the cultural castration experienced by the Mundas during the colonial regime. This condition is well illustrated in Emma LaRocque words: “…perhaps the height of cheekiness in a colonizer is to steal your language, withhold his from you as long as he can, then turn around and demand that you speak or write better than he does.
And when you do, he accuses you of "uppityness" or cultural inauthenticity."

After leaving the Mission Birsa began to roam in the forest. His mind was so destabilized. The psychological insecurity experienced by Birsa during this period is well illustrated in his decision to become a seer after mastering the Hindu scriptures. He went the ashram of Ananda Pande, a Hindu pandit, only to get disenchanted by the Hindu principles. With this, his enthrallment with the dikhu ideals came to an abrupt end. His search for panacea in the ideals of Christianity and Hinduism did not bear any fruits. In order to become a true revolutionary leader he had to undergo a series of ordeals and tribulation – both at physical and psychological levels. On the other level, it proliferated his belief in his own culture. Birsa's failure to find a resolution for his psychological crisis strikes parallel with the manner Bakha, the untouchable protagonist of Mulkraj Anand's Untouchable (1935), attempted to resolve his identity crisis. But, unlike Bakha, Birsa was equally disenchanted by the western education as well as the Hindu scriptures. He came to understand that he cannot have a succor and solace apart from his culture and community. The text shows how Birsa went through a wide range of psychological experiences before he became the undisputed leader of the Munda people.

Under the British rule, the colonial law was imposed upon the indigenous tribal communities, generating inestimable impact upon their geocultural spheres. The colonial government's new policies, especially the land
and forest laws, have deprived the tribal societies of their traditional means of subsistence. The condition of the Mundos in Chalkaadi was getting more and worse. Most of them were starving. The new laws introduced by the British government, in effect, dispossessed them of all their means of livelihood. The tribals were pushed into dire poverty and destitution by these intercessions. The veteran rebels visited Birsa and informed him about the continuing ejection of the Mundos from their homelands. The extreme abjection of his people began to fill Birsa's mind with darkness. In Palamau, Manbhum and Singbhum districts the Mundos were being forced out of their land. When Sunara informed him about the new law which prevented the tribals from entering the jungle he protested in rage: "[T]he right of the forest is the first right in Krishnabharat. Then the nation of these white men was lying under the deep ocean. Since then the black people in Krishnabharat call the forest their mother." (82) He declared that their customary rights over the forest could not be curtailed by any system, legal or otherwise, since they date back to thousands of years. He led his associates to Chaibasa to lodge complaints with the forest office. He emphatically told the officers to concede the Mundos the right over forest. But his request was outrightly rejected. They were insulted by the officers. Back home, he found his parents in acute distress. They were not allowed to enter the forest and gather the China-grass for their meal. However, due to the pressure of hunger many Mundos violated the rule by entering the forest and were consequently reprimanded. After having witnessed all these events Birsa felt a deep sense of resentment and anger.
with the colonial establishment.

*Aranyer Adhikar* demonstrates, contrary to the common conviction that the uprisings of the tribals do not happen spontaneously. A deep investigation into the nature and causes of these uprisings reveals that the tribal communities took arms only after seeking many other non-militant options before the rebellion. In all these cases — Birsa' Ulgulan, Santhal's Hool, Sardar Mulkuyi — armed struggle was their final preference. Before turning to the recourse of weapon they had sought all options. The text contains references to many legal cases in which the tribals lost. Referring to a law suit with a landlord the author says: "Mundas failed in the case. They have arranged the lawyers by selling off their cattle. Now everything is lost. They did not get their land back. In addition, they had to pay the fine for grazing the cows in the fields of Jagdish." (83) Later, the Mundas approached the Mission requesting them to use its coercive power upon the government to give them their customary right over the land. But Mission, which did not have the social amelioration of the tribals in its agenda, kept a strategic silence over their problems. Consequently, their faith in the Mission began to subside and they started leaving it. This feeling of disillusionment is well illustrated in the words of a veteran sardar: "[W]hat was wrong with our Singhbonga? Then we used to light the lamps. There were light. When these dikhus came, darkness enveloped us. What did we gain by joining the Mission? Did'n't it only hike up the darkness? (74) Explicating how the churches and missionaries in the colonies carry out the cultural agendas of colonialism by
detribalizing the natives, Fanon observes in The Wretched of the Earth: "[T]he Church in the colonies is the white people's Church, the foreigner's Church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor." (32) Thus, it can be seen that the Mundas in Chottanagpur, after having failed in their incessant endeavours to find a solution for their problems through institutional means, decided to take the recourse of arms to reclaim their fundamental rights. The text marks the metamorphosis of the Mundas from compliant victims to adamant rebels.

The story achieves an epic dimension with the invocation of the natural powers. The mythic fiber of the story is provided by Birsa's dialogue with the aranyajanani (the Mother Forest). Birsa's imaginary dialogue with the aranyajanani provides a clear picture about his confused state of mind. Exacerbated by the extremely pathetic condition of his people, Birsa used to roam through the forest. He felt as if the Mother Forest pleading him to save her from the exploiters. The author narrates: "[T]his forest is the mother of Mundas. It is the aranyajanani. Birsa could hear the lamentation of that forest. Birsa has come to understand the painful cry. It is the lamenting of an insulted mother. Laws have imprisoned her. It is lamenting "Birsa, you save me. I want to be pure. You must save me Birsa!" (87) The melancholic wailing of the forest implies an irresistible urge from his own collective unconsciousness. Birsa heard the Mother Forest wailing like a poor, skinny helpless mother.

Today, I have become impure my son.

I will make you pure and chaste, mother.
These landlords and foreigners made me polluted my son.

I will save you mother.

My sons are made homeless.

I will get back the homes for them.

The Mundas, Santals and other tribes are leaving me my son.

I won't let them leave you.

No one hears my lamenting.

Mother, where are you?

In your heart, in your blood (88).

This imaginary dialogue is important to the fabric of the text as it provides a convincing ground for Birsa to take up the leadership of his people in the war against their oppressors. The vision of the forest as a naked and offended Munda woman created new sense of responsibility in him. Birsa became increasingly receptive to these voices and, in the process, regained his lost identity. He got possessed by these voices — a possession which pressed for the recuperation of his own history from the premise of his confused consciousness. The deep uncertainties and confusions that enveloped his psyche began to melt. Furthermore, it provided a psychological purgation to him. As Birsa internalizes the spirit and energy of his own ancestral past, shaking off the effects of colonial education, there is a discernible change in terms of his physical presence in the text. Consequently, he becomes the focal
point of the other Mundas who have begun to view him as a conduit of their ancestral past. After this process, he qualifies himself to represent his community. In a rare mood of insight he shouts: “I will become the bagvan! The saviour of this land! I am born in the blood of Chuttu and Naagu. I will save the Mundas.” (89) Initially, he was experiencing a physic dislocation due to his inability to connect his interior and exterior landscapes. After this, he is seen to undergo a dramatic transformation both in psychological and mythical terms. Birsa’s prophetic vision involves the liberation of his community and its disguised meaning is extended across the text. The denuded Mother Forest becomes a potent symbol of colonial domination in the text.

The forest figures in Birsa’s consciousness for another reason too. For the tribal communities, their socio-economic and cultural existence is inextricably connected with the forest. The relation between the tribals and the forest is very old. To them, forest is the means of their survival as well as the repository of culture. Their food supply comes mostly from the forest. But the forest policies introduced by the colonial government deprived them of their customary rights over the forest. Earlier, they had enjoyed considerable freedom to use forest and hunt the animals. Besides providing the means of livelihood, forests supply them fuel, medicines, fruits and materials to build their homes etc. Their gods abode in the forest. This explains the tribal people’s deep attachment with the jungle. Due to all these factors they have reacted sharply to the restrictions imposed by the government on their
traditional rights.

The text, among other things, examines the impact of colonial forest laws upon the socio-cultural life of the tribals. Perhaps, one of the most organized intrusions into the geo-cultural spheres of the Mundas, as of the other tribal communities, is the functioning of the forest department. Many measures taken by the forest department had a disconcerting impact upon the life of the tribal people. The extensive planting of teaks in the forest, for example, put their indigenous means of livelihood at stake. Teak gradually replaced sal and mohua etc. The tribals in Chottanagpur region traditionally depended upon the sal trees to satisfy many of their daily needs. Sal meant a lot to them. Its wood, its fruits and its leaves were used by them to satisfy their various livelihood requirements. Sal was integral to their economy. Besides, it enjoyed a religious status among the tribals. In an interview with Spivak, Mahasweta invites attention to this ecological displacement: “[T]hey worship sal trees, and the government was introducing teak (saguna). The cry went up: saguna hatao, sal bachao. This became a war for the tribals. They destroyed teak nurseries, planted sal.” (xvii) By introducing many such anti-tribal reformations the colonial government virtually bypassed the indigenous economy in a drastic manner. Criticizing the anti-tribal forest policy introduced by the government in post-independent period Mahasweta writes in Dust on the Road: “[O]ur villagers have been robbed of food, fuel and means of survival because of the state’s social forestry policy. One cannot eat the leaf, bark or fruit of eucalyptus. Eucalyptus does not offer shelter from
sun and rain. But protest against eucalyptus, in West Bengal, is interpreted as the influence of Jharkhandi propaganda.” (66)

The dialogue between Birsa and the forest-goddess suggests, besides revealing his disturbed state of mind, the insertion of some primitive energy into his perturbed psyche. It was an assurance that he required badly during those days of spiritual crisis. He came back from the forest, as if divinely inspired, accompanied by a crowd of people and told his crying mother: “I have become a god. Your lap cannot hold me anymore. I am the god of the earth.” (89) Here the auteur renders an epic breadth to the text without marring its historical authenticity. One of the chief aims of Birsa’s revolt was to repossess their customary right over the forest: “[F]orest won’t be burnt if Ulguulan is fired. It is the blood and heart of human beings that are burnt in it. It won’t destroy the forest. Instead, it will only renovate it. Mother forest is sitting with the sons of the forest on her lap – like the mother of the Mundas or the mother of Birsa.” (6) The very title of the novel *Aranyer Adhikar* (Right to the Forest) suggests this inseparable connectivity between the tribals and the forest.

Birsa’s rebellion was directed against three power -- the government, Mission and local landlordism. When the fire of *Ulgulan* burnt extensively in the tribal settlements of Chottanagpur, Mundas stopped paying the tax and interest. It is significant that the first stage of *Ulgulan* was marked by a kind of civil disobedience. This was followed by armed rebellion. The text demonstrates how these hegemonic forces join hands to subjugate the tribal
people. Furthermore, Birsa’s movement was deeply rooted in the tradition of tribal struggle. It marks a continuation of the earlier struggles, not only of the Mundas but also of other tribals like Santals and Kols. Birsa used calculated tactics to bring the crushed Mundas to the path of resistance. Birsa made them feel ashamed of the wretched condition they were in. Shame, as Marx would have us believe, is a revolutionary sentiment. To the thousands of Mundas in Chottanagour Birsa was a leader “who could oppose both the landlords and government and help them in regaining their lost farming lands and forest.” (94) It is apparent that Mahasweta has presented Birsa as an undisputable revolutionary leader, not a God. He is a bagvan who could help them to fill their belly with gruel and get them salt. Their anticipation of a saviour is elaborately described in the text. Strikingly, all these attributes resonate the traits of a revolutionary. News of the emergence of a bagvan spread instantly. From Chottanagpur to Palamau the news of Birsa’s ascription of divinity disseminated like a wildfire. Devotees started flowing to Chalkar from far and near to see their liberator. Birsa’s initial response to his newly achieved status was steady and full-fledged. He understood the responsibility involved in his new status. Owing to their continuous exposure to social ostracism and cultural subjugation, the Mundas, first of all, expected their bagvan to save them from their oppressors. In the novel Mahasweta has presented Birsa as a bagvan who “should not try to tell the stories of Paradise to the starving people.”(94) Birsa was nonetheless aware about the massive responsibility placed upon his shoulder. He knew that it was a strenuous task to muster
resources to thwart the well organized colonial regime. In no part of the text he is shown to exult for having the status of a god. Instead, it brought him a series of exigent tasks which made his life on edge.

People sought the counsel of Birsa bagvan when they were affected by problems of epidemics. When people of Kattuyi village were dying of cholera Birsa visited there and gave directions to the people about the need of taking precautions to prevent it from spreading. Birsa directed them to keep hygiene and use only the water of flowing stream. His directions, besides having saved the people from the epidemics, served to reinforce his image of bagvan among them. It is ironical that it was the "scientific" knowledge received from the Mission that helped him to resolve such problems. In a short span of time the story of bagvan spread in many villages. However, Birsa knew that such intellectual acrobatics were not sufficient to become the leader of a crushed community.

Birsa cult instilled a new spirit in the mind of the Mundas. He could make them anger at the encroachments to which they were being subjected. They were to acknowledge Birsa as their leader and God, and to abide by his rules to be his real devotees. The transformation which the Birsa movement brought upon the character of the Mundas was astonishing. They became very sturdy and hardnosed in their stance towards their antagonistic milieu. They openly flouted the landlords and moneylenders. With a sense of confidence and courage, imparted by Ulgulan, they interrogated the landlords and officers. Furthermore, the Mundas turned away from their superstitious
practices. Birsa gradually tried to liberate his people from the fetters of ignorance and superstition. Their self-respect and reliance on their culture aggravated dramatically. Fanon explicates the logics of decolonization by stressing the role of self-assertion and violence. Decolonization, observes Fanon, “never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentially into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history’s floodlights upon them.” (The Wretched of the Earth 28) In this way, Ulgulan charters a drastic digression in the routines of the tribal people. In a short span of time, Birsa’s undisputable status as a leader came to be acknowledged by all categories of people – his friends as well as foes. The Deputy Commissioner Streetfield himself admits:

What if the lad is only a poor Munda – didn’t he try to wobble the powerful government? Yes, I feel respect for him. He subsists on the gruel made of a handful of china grass and wears just a strip of rag around his waste. Their weapon is only the bows and arrows. They bear the weight of tax and interest upon their shoulder. Hasn’t he empowered these Mundas to fight the British power? (216).

There were different responses to the divine aura ascribed upon Birsa. It can be seen that the dissemination of Birsa cult, besides forging a new spirit among the Mundas, caused much concern among the privileged people. The Mission was understandably upset by the new turn of things. There was a
drastic reduction in the tribal people's dependency upon the Mission. No one went there to seek shelter and help. Moreover, the converted Mudas began to leave the Mission to become the disciples of Birsa bagvan.

The text explicates how the functioning of the colonial regime, in tandem with the missionaries, gradually destroyed the traditional culture of the tribals in India by grinding down its indigenous value system, firstly through religious conversions to Christianity, and secondly by imposing an alien legal, administrative and political system in the place of the indigenous one, which was slowly being substituted. Mission, on the other hand, with its seductive egalitarian appeal, continued to find its subjects among the depraved natives. Missionary activities among the tribal communities in colonial India, as elsewhere, have virtually sapped the vitality and optimism of the primitive groups. Conversion in the colonies had been one of the primary means of acculturation and detribalization. Examining the cultural denigration consequent upon the process of colonialism, Jean Paul Sartre observes: "[V]iolence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm's length; it seeks to dehumanize them. Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours."

This cultural imperialism, besides uprooting the native people from the geo-cultural mooring, led to the conflict between the Christian tribals and non-Christian tribals. The converted tribals by virtue of their better education and awareness cornered the benefits of the welfare schemes given by the
Significantly enough, it is the consideration of the stomach which drove the tribal people to take shelter at the Mission. This is illustrated in the conversion of Birsa’s family. As a child Birsa was christened along with his family. Sugana Munda, Birsa’s father, had no means to ensure the subsistence of his family. One day, Sugana told him: “Birsa, why don’t you try to be like everyone else! If you become an ordinary person like everyone, you will always be with us. We can go to become Christians when the draught comes. In good times we can come back to our own religion” (43). The irony of conversion in colonies is well exemplified in Sugana’s words. It was the dire poverty, necessitated by the colonial intercession to their traditional economy, which forced the tribal people to seek shelter in the Mission. The operation of the church in the colonies was just another extension of the colonial administration. They effected cultural subjugation in the colonies. This is the reason why Birsa conceded a large space for the restoration of cultural identity in his rebellion. Birsa’s Ulgulan, admittedly, reduced the dependency of the Mundas upon the Mission.

Mahasweta shows how the British colonialism and the evangelical Missions worked hand in hand in the subjugation the people of India, particularly the tribal communities. This alliance is palpable in the regular correspondence done between them for discussing and managing the case of the revolting tribals. Mission kept the district administration informed about the dissenting activities among the natives. They viewed the self-assertion
and expression of dignity on the part of the tribal people as a gesture of looming rebellion. This is well illustrated in the correspondence Reverend Hoffman kept with the Deputy Commissioner. When the Mundas began to leave the Mission the authorities thought it as the noticeable symptom of imminent revolution. The text, in a unique fashion, debunks the reciprocal nexus between the Mission and the colonial administration.

The landlords and traders were obviously exasperated at the new turn of things. They were disturbed about the immense support Birsa received among the Mundas, who had stopped borrowing money from them. Nor did they pay the tax and interests. They stopped going to work in the zamindar’s land and tea gardens. The history of land alienation in the tribal areas began during the British colonialism. The zamindars enjoyed absolute freedom under the British administration. Due to their lack of access to the resources, the tribals were indebted to the local moneylenders. Indebtedness was almost unavoidable due to the heavy, compound interest to be paid to the moneylenders. Consequently, many of the tribals land came under the detention of the moneylenders, zamindars and traders who appropriated it either by advancing them loans or by forcible eviction. Mahasweta exhibits that the resistance and counteraction from the part of the oppressed, though fragmented in scale and volume, could destabilize the oppressors.

In each stage of his development Birsa is shown to be forging fresh strategies for the conduction of his rebellion. He used traditional sabha (assemblage) to convey revolutionary ideals to his people. He stressed on
counteractions: “[L]isten carefully. Mudas are in very bad condition today. The landlords and the rich people are exploiting the Mudas everywhere. By any means we have to get freedom. We have to expel all the foreigners from our land. No one should pay the tax. We must regain this forest.” (106) Each of his words is uttered with a studied manner with an intention of exerting influence upon the people. The tribal uprisings always involved the deployment of certain indigenous codes of dress, speech and behavior which tended to invert the codes through which their social superiors dominated them in everyday life. During the campaigning of Ulgulan, the Mudas used their own indigenous system of communication to pass information between the rebels at different locations. For instance, they would send a leaf to denote peace. Sending of an arrow meant war. Birsa conducted constant “study classes” to enliven the trampled spirit of his people. When taken away by the police Birsa whispered to Dhani to collect the black abrus seeds. It was secret code for getting ready for the imminent war.

The mobilization of the Mudas was viewed with much doubt and apprehension by the district administration. The Mission and government kept a close surveillance of their movements. To them, Birsa has become, to quote the words of Miyars, “a potential danger” to be crushed immediately (191). Frightened by the mobilization of the tribal people under the leadership of Birsa, the Mission at Chaibhasa regularly informed the government about the activities of the Birsaites. They wrote to the office of the Deputy Commissioner: “[T]hough Birsa is talking of certain dharma, his followers
have started collecting weapons.” (106) There were differences of opinion among the local administration as to the way the Munda issue was to be dealt with. The district administration thought that the officers at Ranchi were unnecessarily fearing Birsa. At first, the objectives of Birsa’s movement were ambiguous to them.

The colonial strategy of suppressing the dissenting voices is apparent in the way Miyars attempted to label Birsa as a mad man, thereby justifying the severe action taken against him. But his plan did not work as Doctor Rojors refused to certify it. Doctor Rojors, like Barrister Jacob, was a man of principle. They were free from the colonial logic and prejudices. He outrightly rejected the proposal of Miyars to certify Birsa an insane. Furthermore, he argued strappingly with Miyars in favour of Mundas. He openly stated that the condition of Mundas has become worse under British rule since they didn’t have access to justice. He even went to the extent of appreciating Birsa for having taught the Mundas to be proud of their own culture. Doctor Rojors tells Miyars: “Birsa has been able to evoke a self confidence among his followers. For the first time I have seen them feeling pride of being Mundas. So far they had only lamented their Munda identity.” (114) The inaccessibility of the tribal people to the colonial justice has been reiterated in many occasions in the text. The Mundas knew no other language other than their own language Mundari. The British judges who did not know the Mundari language always failed to understand their grievances. The translators used to distort and dilute the facts while explaining their cases to the judges. Famous
historian K.N.Panikker observes:

While engaged in conquest and initial administrative organization, the company's officials had hardly any time or the opportunity to gain knowledge about the civilization they encountered. The customs, habits, traditions and social institution of the newly subjected people remained an enigma to them. Their bewilderment was not only because of the discernible cultural plurality, but also because of the lack of access to knowledge about the subjected (124).

Among other things, the text offers a sharp critique of Colonial justice and its bogus claims of liberalism. The colonial justice upholds its written codes and claims to guarantee justice for all. This is well illustrated in the words of Miyars. He presumptuously tells Birsa: "British law is very liberal. It is based on justice. Both the accused and plaintiff get lawyers." (116) Yet, however liberal and refreshing this position may at first appear, it has problems. Because, it not only presupposes a definition of justice but also promotes a certain way of implementing justice. The bogus pronouncements of colonial justice and its pretensions of liberalism are dismantled in the text. The trail of the Munda rebels is indefinitely delayed for months. By then, most of the prisoners died in the prison cells. To the Mundas, justice is both delayed and denied by the colonial government.

During his first imprisonment Birsa refused to answer most of the questions put to him and rejected the offer of a defense counsel. On the night
before the day of Birsa’s trial, thousands of Mundas came swarming with
flaming torches to see their bagvan. They surrounded the Khunti police
station and demanded immediate trial. The frightened authorities shifted
Birsa to Ranchi where he was tried and sentenced to two years of rigorous
imprisonment. On release, Birsa came back to his village and found it a
desiccated and inhospitable terrain owing to the draught. The Mundas were
already deprived of all their means of subsistence. They were practically
strangled by the hostilities of the authorities and the landlords. They started
complaining about the atrocities meted out to them by the authorities. The
draught in that year had intensified their hapless condition. Birsa, realizing
the gravity of the situation, started organizing his people to fight their
enemies to ensure their survival. Birsa’s Ulgulan, by all means, was triggered
by the question of survival.

Even as a boy, Birsa was very much concerned about the question of
survival. This is well illustrated in his stealing the ring from the body of a
dead woman from the cemetery. After having left the Mission and the ashram
Birsa roamed in the forest. His mind was already haunted by many disturbing
questions. At home, he found his parents in utter destitution without
anything to eat. Out of utter destitution and hunger he went to the cemetery.
He took the silver ring and coins buried with a Munda woman named Chalki.
She was pregnant when she died. According to the Munda faith, pregnant
women are to be buried with whatever jewels they wear. They believe that it
would make their access to the heaven easier. So the silver ring on her thumb
was not removed when Chalki was buried. Birsa took the silver ring from the dead body from the cemetery ground and sold it in the market to buy rice for his mother and father who had been starving for many days. The news instantly spread in Chakladi. On being questioned by his raged mother Birsa answers: "[A]ren't they dead? The dead people feel no hunger. Hunger is felt by those who are live. Do the dead need money or rice?" (86) To him the consideration of the stomach is greater than anything else. Hunger comes to be a motivating factor. Ironically enough, the same motive of hunger became instrumental in his captivity. He was arrested when Parami boiled the rice against his direction. Parami's thoughtless act was also prompted by her irresistible hunger. Mahasweta shows, in a unique fashion, how the motive of hunger violates the traditions and taboos. Understandably, both these acts solicited sharp censure from the elder members of the community. This event, which otherwise should have diminished his popularity, was instrumental in his ascription of divinity. This episode is relevant to the fabric of the story as it shows Birsa in a better light. Later during the campaign of *Ulgulan*, Birsa consistently considered the impediments to the sustenance of his people, thereby placing the question of survival above everything. Survival becomes a central concern in the story.

Birsa's *Ulgulan* was not inspired by any immediate events or aims. It is the outcome of many years of silent planning and home works. In one of the meetings held in the forest he declared that the chief aim of *Ulgulan* was to fight the dikhus, the intruders. Ignoring the admonition given by the
Commissioner, Birsa began to address his people again. He talked them of war to be made against their oppressors. He told them: "[W]e must get rid of all our enemies. We must teach all the devils — the British, kings, landlords — a lesson." (167) He organized all the scattered Mundas for a war against all their persecutors, including the government, missionaries, zamindars and all other dikhus. His image of bagvan helped him to organize the scattered Mundas for the rebellion.

Birsa started his campaigning in the remote villages deep in the mountainous jungle, where the police could not reach immediately. Birsa is seen to be making a lot of home works before his rebellion. He conducted continuous "study classes" to the rebels. He suggested that they should meet at least twice in a week, possibly on every Thursday and Sunday. It has been decided that the meeting will be conducted during night to shun the surveillance of the authorities. He categorized his supporters into different groups for strategic convenience and gave them different assignment. They veteran sardars were designated as puranaks and they were expected to teach the lessons of war to others. Those who have abodes deep in the forest were to host the meetings and they were called pracharaks. And the youngest members among the rebels were called naanaks. Birsa addressed the crowd with much conviction and courage. The text explicates how the subalterns resist at communal level and how these resistances are carried out through the medium of traditional and communal institutions.

Birsa asked his followers to abandon many of their ordinary
indulgences like dancing, boozing and festivities. He convinced the Mundas that for the realization of Ulguulan many of their personal and collective pleasures should be forfeited. They readily accepted his proposals without any demure. Consequently, the songs and dances at the occasion of Holi and other festivals have been restrained. There were no more hunting and festivals during that period. All their attention was focused on a single mission — Ulguulan. They did not let any other matters distract them. By incorporating such taboos into the framework of the rebellion, Birsa could concentrate their entire energy upon the cause of revolution. They even abandoned some of their usual rituals and festivals like Baaparva, Paachika and Karamparva (174). On being asked about the newly introduced taboos he told Karmi: “[T]he life of Mundas is beset with sorrows. Have they ever benefited by these poojas and dances? This is not what they should do mother. This is the manner of my new religion. I don’t want to chide them. Nor could I forget them. I must teach them how to live. I will teach them to die and kill.” (176) By deploying these well-planned strategies Birsa, in effect, politicized his people.

It can be seen that Birsa’s visions and objectives of Ulguulan were comprehensive and historically informed. The author narrates: “Birsa’s aim is to take the Mundas from the primitive deadliness and blind rituals to the contemporary age. But, there should not be any assembly, law and administration made by the British. Birsa desires to give the light of modernity to them who have seen only the darkness since thousands of years.
They should keep their simplicity and the sense of justice though they reach modernity.” (199) Through constant counselings and meetings he prepared them mentally for the war. In a little while, the message of Ulgulan was disseminated among the tribals like a fire in the forest. More and more people joined it. The involvement of the tribal people in Ulgulan was complete. All the Mundas, irrespective of their sex and age participated in the revolution. Sunara, to cite an example, had come to join the Ulgulan by setting fire to the house of Sooraj Singh, the landlord, whom he is indebted through a bond. In a short span of time its fame extended beyond Chottanagpur. The Birsaites maintained absolute discipline during the preparation and execution of the revolution. A sense of pride coupled with a logic of resistance encompassed the mind of the Mundas.

The tradition of protest that Birsa inherited from his forefathers involves the resistance and rejection of the dikhus, both foreign and native. Birsa’s Ulgulan had immediate as well as distant objectives. Its immediate objective was to force the government to rework the anti-tribal laws and to ensure the livelihood of the tribals. The distant aims involve the repossession of their crushed cultural identity, the reclaiming of their lost heritage and a call to change the mindset of the elite classes towards the tribals. As Mahasweta aptly points out: “[T]he real problem of the tribal is not just that of getting material support for survival. Mainstream society is carrying on a continuous, shrewd and systematic assault on his social system, his culture, his very tribal identity and existence.” (Dust on the Road 109). Birsa declared
that the first agenda of *Ulgulan* was to recapture the old temples of Chutia and Jagannathpuri. Birsa asked his followers to repossess the temples which were once theirs. The recapturing of the Hindu temples was symbolic, not only because it implies the pre-colonial invasions to their indigenous culture, but also because of the deep cultural consciousness that the Birsa movement implicates.

By focusing on the multifarious impact of the process of colonialism upon the life of the tribal communities in India, *Aranyer Adhikar* provides a sharp critique of colonialism. Besides demonstrating how colonialism with its extractive mechanism impoverished the colonized people by obliterating their traditional economy, it exhibits how it denigrated the cultures of the natives. Birsa could create a strong sense of resentment against the colonial regime in the mind of the Mundas. He achieved this by questioning and rejecting the very legitimacy of colonial regime. *Ulgulan* aimed to replace the illegitimate colonial rule with an alternative authority within the tribal community. The anti-colonial spirit inherent in Birsa's rebellion has not been acknowledged by the official chroniclers of the country. By highlighting the anti-colonial character of Birsa's rebellion in 1899, Mahasweta shows that it was not merely against the colonial administration but against the colonialism itself. She provides an alternative history by recuperating the submerged identities in Indian history. Such a recounting of subaltern history constitutes subversive cultural politics because it, besides exposing the forms of power that oppress subaltern peoples, provides certain liberating alternatives.
When the first meeting of Ulgulan was conducted furtively in the house of Jagari Munda, Birsa addressed the Mundas gathered there and told them that there were two ways in front of them. One is the path of peace and the other is the path of war. They examined both alternatives in details. The sardars had gone through the path of peace for a long time. But it hadn’t borne fruit so far. They had already resorted to the law, sent complaints and appeared in the court. They have found such means futile and inadequate. Whereas, the latter – the path of war – involves much risk and danger. He explained: “[T]here are many thorns in the path of war. There is much sorrow in it. Sometime we will have to abandon this life and this world. We may die of hunger. We may be put in the prison. But, we have no other options.” (186)

They examined all other options but found them unviable. They were formerly tried and found inadequate. They decided not to rely on the administrative organs of the colonial government that regularly violated its own stated rules and paced towards an open revolution against their oppressors.

Birsa was obviously not imposing a war upon his people who were already devastated. At each stage of the revolt, he called the meetings of the veteran members to get their counsel on the issues encountered by them. Before taking recourse to arms they examined all other alternative but had to reject them in the light of their own past experiences. The non-militant forms of mobilization were found inadequate to obtain justice. The excessive exposure to oppression has often triggered a deep discontent and resentment.
in the tribals. They were accustomed to take arms against their persecutors when the law did not help them, the government remained unsympathetic and the police failed to protect them and also pestered them. They adopted two paths for achieving their objectives. First of all, they adopted the non-violent path of bargaining and negotiating with the government and using a variety of pressure tactics without resorting to violence. Secondly, they adopted the militant path of violence or mass struggles. Through both these means they sought to evoke a structural transformation and reform to empower their communities. Birsa’s rebellion was conducted after many months of planning and preparations. Initially, its political practice began with giving petitions to the authorities about the urgent issues they encountered. Before taking up the role of a Munda leader Birsa himself had given complaints to the local official about the teeming issues experienced by his people. But the course of law was proven to be unviable. This feature of tribal uprisings stands in sharp contrast to the versions of mainstream historiography which always tend to view them as spontaneous and apolitical. Rebuffing the concept of tribal and peasant insurgencies being spontaneous Guha says: "[I]t would be difficult to cite an uprising on any significant scale that was not in fact preceded either by less militant types of mobilization when other means had been tried and found wanting or by parley among its principals seriously to weigh the pros and cons of any recourse to arms." (The Prose of ... 1) But with the propelling of Ulguulan, the Munda politics began to turn away from the practice of petitioning the
authority that always defied its own stated rules and headed towards an armed struggle as a practical, though desperate, means to achieve justice. The Mudas were socially marginalized, economically browbeaten and culturally subjugated and had no option but to take arms to ensure their survival.

Birsa’s rebellion was actually political in content, though religious in form. Like many tribal rebellions during the colonial period Birsa’s Ulgulan was religious in its manifestation. It is characterized by the deployment of a series of traditional and religious codes in all its stages – in the mobilization of the people as well as in the preparation and conduction of the rebellion. The religiosity of the subaltern movements has been a pivotal area of contestation in subaltern discourse. It is well illustrated in the statements of Sidhu and Kanu, two Santal rebels, who were hung by the British government in India after the Santal Hool. On being interrogated, they explained the British officials that they conducted the rising owing to the instructions they had received from their Thakur (god) who had also assured them that British bullets would not harm the devotee-rebels. Elucidating the religiosity involved in the tribal uprising Guha observes:

Religiosity was, by all accounts, central to the hool (rebellion). The notion of power which inspired it was explicitly religious in character. It was not that power was a content wrapped up in a form external to it called religion. Hence the attribution of the rising to a divine command rather than to any particular grievance; the enactment of rituals both before (eg: propitiatory
ceremonies to ward off the apocalypse of the Primeval Serpents) and during the uprising (worshipping the goddess Durga, bathing in the Ganges, etc); the generation and circulation of myth is its characteristic vehicle -- rumour (qtd. in Chakrabarty 6).

The ascription of divinity upon Birsa itself denotes the religiosity of Ulgulan. Birsa could exploit this religious image for the mobilization of the people as well as the execution of his revolution. He often spoke to them, as if divinely inspired. It was with a ritualistic sanctity that the Mundas acted in each stage of the rebellion. To them, all their rebellious gestures -- whether the killing of the constable or attacking the Missions -- were meant to gratify their deity, Birsa bagvan. However, Mahasweta has taken special attention not to eclipse the political substance of Birsa’s movement by overemphasizing its religious content. Birsa’s Ulgulan commenced with the symbolic recapturing of the temples of Chuttiya and Jagannathpuri. This was decided in the first meeting itself. Birsa declared that the temples actually belonged to the Mundas. Declaring the aims of Ulgulan he tells his people: “[W]e need our sacred places and primitive venues. We must get the old temples. We must get back the temples of Chuttiya and Jagannathpuri. Once they were ours. Now we are denied entry there.” (169) The retrieval of the lost heritage surfaces to be one of the primary agendas of Ulgulan. Birsa’s call for the reclaiming the old temples of Chuttiya and Jagannathpuri implicates the cultural agenda of Ulgulan.
It is significant that Birsa started his revolution by making a call to recuperate the tradition and culture dispossessed of them. As far as the tribal communities in India are concerned they are dispossessed of many things, including their gods. Many of their temples where they had been worshipping their primitive gods were taken over by the upper caste Hindus. Furthermore, Birsa was deeply concerned about the humiliation and insults heaped upon his people by the upper caste Hindus, who viewed the tribal people as untouchables. Birsa identified the native kings and landlords as their enemies. He strongly protested against the racial prejudices meted out to them by the dominant castes. He declares: "[W]e don’t have any right to wear dhoti or turban or even slippers in front of the dikhu kings and landlords. We aren’t allowed to dine in tile plate. Nor can we sit on high place. And we are denied access in the temples of our forefathers." (159) His words reflect his deep consciousness about the discrimination experienced by the tribals in the mainstream society. He was deeply disenchanted with the ideals of Hinduism, especially after his tenure with the Hindu pandit Ananda. One of the proclaimed agendas of Ulgulan was to reject all the forces that crushed their integrity.

Birsa wanted Ulgulan to be a comprehensive revolution which would liberate the tribal people from all types of yokes and fetters. Just a few days before the Christmas, he declared the major strategies of Ulgulan to his fellow rebels. His plan was to attack the Christian centers, thereby scarring them. He declared: "Ulgulan has two chapters - one is to frighten the Christians by
setting fire and shooting arrows. The armed revolution will be started in the second phase." (213) On the Christmas Eve, when the European club at Ranchi was excited in festivities, the Mundas started their attack by shooting arrows at the German Mission and other Christian institutions. The Christmas celebration was meddled by the unexpected attack of Birsa’s men. Pointing out this aspect of Birsa’s rebellion Spivak aptly observes that “ulgulan of 1899-1901 de-hegemonized millenarian Christianity in the Indian context.” (Subaltern Studies... 358) The attack was made in the form of guerilla warfare. Immediately after the attack they fled from the scene without leaving any evidence. It is significant that the initial project of ulgulan involves an assertion and recuperation of cultural identity. This reclaiming extends from the symbolic recapturing of the temples in Chuttiya and Jagannathapuri to the attack of the Christian centers. The politics of subaltern inevitably involves a strapping negation of the models prescribed by the hegemonic ideologies. Birsa’s movement is characterized by the deployment of such counter strategies and codes. Guha observes:

When a peasant rose in revolt at any time or place under the Raj, he did so necessarily and explicitly in violation of a series of codes which defined his very existence as a member of that colonial and still largely semi-feudal society. For his subalternity was materialized by the structure of property, institutionalized by law, sanctified by religion and made more tolerable -- and even desirable -- by tradition (The Prose of... 1).
The attack on the churches and Missions, for example, implicates a resistance at the cultural level. *Aranyer Adhikar* is replete with the descriptions of the anxieties raised out of this cultural dilemma.

The police became alert and spread their net to arrest the Munda rebels. The rebels started killing the landlords and moneylenders from their hide-outs. Their movements were mainly during night that the police could not catch him. The uprising was more intensive in Singbhum area where three persons including a constable, a watchman and a trader were killed. Police stations were attacked. Heavy fighting followed throughout Chottanagpur. Birsa warned his followers that "[T]he government has started considering us." (222) Since it is impossible for him to reach every spot and give instructions he asked the rebels to act as per the demand of the situation. He advised his fellow rebels to "act according to the situation using their own prudence." (224) Next day two more constables were killed while they were trying to make a tent in the forest. Gaya Munda led the attack. Gaya's daring act testifies the metamorphosis Birsa cult brought among the Mundas. In *Ulgulan*, each member acted heroically. The violence in the subaltern insurgencies is always necessitated by the oppressive conditions. In an interview given to Spivak, Mahasweta justifies the violence in Munda rising. According to her "[A] tribal lives in harmony with the nature around him, with human beings, even intruders. With everyone. So when he kills, it is a necessary killing." (xxii) Mahasweta, by stressing the relevance of collective and organized politics, sidetracks any prospect of individual exaltation. She
examines all the factors that went into the formation of Birsa's political personality and movement.

Birsa cult had transformed the rebels drastically. This transformation is well illustrated in Narasimha Munda's audacious questioning of the Deputy Commissioner who came to arrest him. On being asked to surrender, he came forward and shouted at the Deputy Commissioner: “[W]hose country is this? Does it belong to you whites? It is our nation. Are we demanding power in your country? Or you show power here? Then who should yield weapons, you or us? Let the whites give in their weapon.” (139) To him, like the other rebels, it was a dangerous but rewarding act. The Deputy Commissioner was taken aback by the unanticipated gesture from an old Munda. As the movement gathered momentum, their fear and submissiveness faded away and they began to demonstrate an adamant mindset. Birsa had reinvigorated the abundant heroic energy latent in them. He was an effectual, if not indispensable, mediator in the empowerment of Munda people. The text marks the metamorphosis of the Mundas from submissive victims to unbending revolutionaries. The revolution had changed them radically. Birsa made them anger at the ruthless encroachments to which they were subjected. The poor folks, who were hitherto crushed under the hostile system, emerged from the abyss of neglect to take back at their oppressors. Their resentment and frustration were translated into revolutionary actions. But, their anger, justified as it is, is often exaggerated as violence by the guardians of the system. “Violence”, observes Fanon, “is a cleansing force” since it “frees
the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction.”
(The Wretched of the Earth '74) From the eighteen year old Sunara to old Donka this impact was discernible. Birsa himself was transformed from a skeptical youth to a resolute leader. *Ulgulan* has changed him also. *Aranyer Adhikar* charters this metamorphosis of the victims which characterizes the subaltern politics.

It was with the attack of Khunty station the uprising of the Mundas came under national attention. The Bengali and English newspapers reported the event. Rumours spread that Ranchi will be attacked by Birsa's men. Consequently, the alarmed authorities requested for more troops in the affected regions. Deputy Commissioner Streetfield was nonetheless aware about the circumstances that forced Munda people to rebel. In one occasion he tells Miyars in an angry tone, when the latter insisted on a ruthless suppression of the Munda rising: “[T]he severe draught for two years, the Chottanagpur land tenure law, the overexploitation of landlords — these have become the substance for their fire.”(215) In spite of his concern for the cause of fighting Mundas, he could not do anything substantial in the case of the Mundas since he is the part of the same corrupted colonial system, which he criticizes. It was only with the killing of the constables that the district administration identified it as a rebellion against the government. The attack on the European club and the Mission had already alerted the colonial administration. The Deputy Commissioner requested the Home Department to deploy army for suppressing the rebellion.
However, with “Operation Sailrakab” Birsa’s Ulgulan enters a new phase. Birsaites took shelter in Sailrakab, a region surrounded by mountains. There were women and children among them. The army took position on the heights and started firing indiscriminately at the Munda people assembled there. The Munda rebels fought bravely with the mighty force of Britain. They shot arrow at the army. Women and children threw stones. So many Mundas were killed in the firing. “Operation Sailrakab”, as it was officially called by the district administrators, exhibits the oppressive strategies of the colonial government. Later, captain Rosch, Streetfield and Hobbs faced a nominal trial in the British court. According to the newspapers like The Statesman, more than four hundred Mundas were killed in the army operation in Sailrakab. But the Munda rebels said that they had lost more than seven hundred people. The official version in this, as expected, was confined to just twenty people. The Mundas buried their dead comrades in the forest itself. The author narrates:

How many burials of the Mundas have been furtively done in the forest? No one knew. Nobody knows that the supporters of Birsa fought the British with the arrows coated with abrus venom in Ulgulan. Future generation may be astonished. One could see in the bosom of the deep forest that some trees are grown more than the rest. Some trees are taller. Should they realize that the blood and flesh of the Munda warriors who died in the Ulgulan had become compost to these trees (254).
The unique fashion that the Mundas kept throughout the rebellion was repeated in the burial of their comrades too. They made the government statistics irrelevant by burying the dead comrades deep in the forest.

Birsa knew that he was going to be caught and persecuted. He kept on telling his supporters that the spirit of his rebellion would never end. Birsa was accustomed to shift his hide-out from one place to another. He went on moving from Sailrakab to Bortodi, to Ayubhatu and to Morahangra. There are with him Donka, Matiya and Sunara. Sunara was badly wounded in the police firing. Birsa had to carry him on his shoulder for many days in the forest. Sally and Parami occasionally came to their hide-outs and kept them informed of the developments in the villages. They managed to smuggle food to the hide-outs of Birsa without being noticed by the police. They narrated him the pathetic condition in the Munda villages. Police was torturing the Munda women under the pretext of interrogation. At this juncture, Donka and Matiya decided to surrender, for they thought it would help to alleviate the persecution to which the police subject the Mundas at the villages, particularly their women. They told Birsa that Ulgulan would continue if he is safe outside. The text also exhibits the sense of solidarity and amity among the Birsaites. It is best illustrated in the way Donka and Matiya managed to get the reward price for Manipahani for their arrest. At the time of surrender Donka told the police that it was Manipahani who persuaded them to surrender. The Government had already declared attractive rewards for the informants. He did so to get the reward amount offered by the government to
her. Manipahani, in turn, bought rice with that money and smuggled it to Birsa’s hide-out.

The conditions that led to Birsa’s captivity are derivative of the socio-economic condition of the Munda people. It was the pressure of survival which coerced Parami to ignore his order and to cook the rice, thereby attracting the informants. Hunger was the prime motive behind her action. Birsa had given the direction to members of his group not to cook anything as the rising smoke would lure the attention of the police. He was extremely tired after many days of straying through the deep forest from one place to other without rest. He looked Sally with his sleepy eyes and said: “[Y]ou go to sleep. Let me also sleep. It seems devil’s sleep has caught me. Limbs are extremely tired. Parami, aren’t you awake? Remember, don’t put fire.” (259) It is worth noting that Birsa was arrested when Parami tried to prepare rice. She felt a deep, irresistible desire to cook the rice brought by Manipahani. She cooked rice and the smoke rose, leading to the captivity of Birsa. He was captured by the police with the help of some hired informants. Furthermore, the informants themselves were poor Mundas who couldn’t resist the temptation of subsistence. It was Sasibhusan and other six Mundas who helped the police to arrest Birsa. To them, five hundred rupees was a big amount.

Birsa’s presentiment about the threat upon his life in the prison was proven to be true soon. He knew what the British government was going to do with him. He wanted to save the other Munda rebels who are put in the
prison. He asked them to tell the court that they were participating in the rebellion without properly understanding what it meant. He had a premonition that he would be killed in the prison itself. He kept on reminding them of the need of continuing the struggle. He told his people: "Don't let your courage go down. Don't think that Bagvan has left you in the jail. I have given you all the weapons. Gave you courage in mind. Showed you the enemy. Don't submit your weapons to anyone. One day victory will be yours. That's certain." (264) He was seriously concerned about the continuity of Ulqulan and its resisting spirit. He wanted their struggle to continue until they obtain their fundamental rights.

Birsa's "clinical murder" in the Ranchi jail reveals the oppressive tactics deployed by the colonial regime to suppress the dissenting voices in the colonies which question its legitimacy and power. Though Birsa was imprisoned in 3rd February 1900, his case was not prepared until May. He was kept in custody for many months without trail. He was given poison by the jail Superintendent Anderson. As a result, he had begun to show some bizarre symptoms in the prison. After examining him the Superintendent declared that he had contracted cholera. Amulya came to sense the conspiracy behind the Superintendent's version of cholera. He became suspicious about the foul play done upon Birsa: "[N]o vomiting, no dysentery, no symptoms of cholera. No reason to contract cholera. Birsa hasn't eaten any meals or drunk any water other than which given by the Superintendent." (265) He realized that it was the part of the plot of the authority to exterminate Birsa in the prison.
itself. He managed to get a special permission to see Birsa in the cell. He was shocked to see the pathetic condition of Birsa. Amulya warned him: "[Y]ou must listen to my words carefully. Don’t eat any food other than which brought by warder Maguram. Don’t take even water from others, Birsa." (265)

Birsa himself was not unaware about this conspiracy. He has already sensed it. He told the disheartened Amulya in an unruffled tone: "[W]ho knows better than the Superintendent that I don’t have cholera! They won’t send me alive from here." (260)

Anderson’s colonial pride was hurt seeing the respect and support Birsa received not only from the tribals but also from his own subordinates. He decided that no special treatment should be given to Birsa, when alive or dead. On being asked about Birsa’s funeral by Amulya he replied in a sarcastic tone: "[I]t has to be conducted exactly in the manner of a prisoner died in the prison cell contracting cholera. One thing is clear. No royal treatment should be there. It is not a special case." (13) To avoid official complications, Birsa’s body was cremated. Anderson had an additional plan behind this decision. He decided to burn Birsa’s body, as against the Munda tradition, to disturb their faith in him. Later, he fabricated a false report to bury the truth about Birsa’s death. He wrote the death report that Birsa died of Asiatic cholera. No one believed his fictitious report on Birsa’s death – from the gravedigger Siva to the Deputy Superintendent Amulya. Anderson’s persistent effort to tear off the divine aura of Birsa was a failure. He let the Munda prisoners see Birsa’s dead body with the hope that watching the
lifeless body of their bagvan would convince them the mortality and commonality of their leader. Ironically enough, it generated a reverse impact upon the Mundas. They started singing in chorus about the glory of their bagvan and his immortality. When Sally furtively came to collect the ashes from the pyre of Birsa she told Siva, the jail sweeper who was assigned the duty of burning the body of Birsa: “Ulgulan has no end. Bagvan has no death.” (21) This catchphrase is reiterated throughout the text. In a rare mood of excitement Siva, came running, crying out loudly that bagvan won’t die and Ulgulan won’t end. It had a strange impact upon the Munda prisoners.

Finally, as a result of a series of efforts made by Barrister Jacob the final verdict on the Munda rebellion came in November 1900. The Statesman and The Bengali had ardently highlighted the issues to a wider audience, thereby compelling the authorities to revise their obdurate stance over the Munda issue. The Munda riot case was wound up. Total 482 Mundas underwent the trial. Only 98 were sentenced. 68 were set free with warning, 296 were freed without any punishment. Those who died in the prison (including Birsa) were 20. Gaya Munda, his son Sanre Munda and Sukhram Munda were sentenced to death for killing the constables (296).

Mahasweta has attached a sequel to the story. Rather than an accessory, it constitutes a vital part of the text. Written in the form of an addressing made to Birsa, it encompasses the notes made by Amulya about the trial of the Mundas involved in Birsa’s rebellion and its case proceedings. Amulya shows, through his notes, how the counter actions of the Mundas in
Chottanagpur under the leadership of Birsa have led to a crisis of colonial authority. The notes reveal that Birsa's movement had been a grave topic of hot altercation among the colonial administration. Amulya's notes reveal the trepidation that the Birsa movement has triggered among the colonial authority. Amulya's notes on the case proceedings of the Munda rising in 1900 shows that the whole British bureaucracy joined hand to see the fall of Birsa and his people. Besides revealing the colonial strategy of silencing the subjects, Amulya's notes dismantle the inadequacy of the colonial laws in bringing justice to the colonized people. The appendix provides a detailed description of the trial procedures in which Barrister Jacob is shown to be arguing ardently in favour of the Mundas. He even cross-examined the Magistrate and Deputy Commissioner for distorting the laws according to their convenience. As expected, the reports and findings were fabricated in such a way as to vindicate the officials involved in the operation and to ensure maximum punishment to the Munda rebels. Finally, exasperated and disenchanted Amulya resigned from the service of the British colonial government.

Even Barrister Jacob was completely disillusioned of the bogus claims of British justice: Earlier he had defended the British law and its munificence. But by the end of the Munda trail he got completely disenchanted by the British law. His deep faith in the British justice was completely shaken. It is best illustrated in the words: "[L]ook, British administration would give you everything like education, media, university, and railway. They achieve
certain selfish ends through them. But, they don't want to give you the fundamental human rights. If they try to give this, it will weaken the landlords and riches who are the pillars of their rule.” (292) Jacob's words unmistakably reflect his deep disillusionment about the imperial programmes of colonialism. Many setbacks notwithstanding, he acted insistently for bringing justice to the tribals. In the court he zealously argued that the Munda prisoners were denied even the fundamental rights ensured by the British justice. It was his active involvement with the Munda cases which helped to bring their issues to national attention. However, the irony is that he was functioning within the parameters of colonial justice. Whereas Birsa, who was already convinced of the inadequacy of the colonial justice, was skeptical about the initiatives of Jacob and Amulya.

Birsa's Ulgulan, like many other tribal risings which took place during the colonial period, was religious in form. The religiosity of the subaltern insurgencies had been a source of great exasperation to the colonial government. They were deeply upset by the superhuman image Birsa enjoyed among the tribals in the whole Chottanagpur region. In the novel, they are shown to be attempting to discredit Birsa in front of his people. The religious content of Birsa's rebellion was, however, clearly informed by a politics of collective resistance. In Aranyer Adhikar, Birsa's movement is delineated in the manner of a revolution with well-defined social and economic objectives. Birsa, notwithstanding his divine aura, is shown to be rejecting many of the tribal traditions, which he thought would hinder the realization of his
revolution. By repudiating several intransigent elements in his own tradition Birsa, in effect, politicized his people. Nor he took recourse in Hindu ideal as Jithu Santhal, the tribal leader, did later. He was equally disenchanted by the Hindu ideal and could view the problems faced by his people as an autonomous one. He even went to the extent of declaring the upper caste people as the enemies of the tribals. This is well illustrated in his decision to recapture the old temples of Chuttiya and Jagannathapuri from the caste Hindus. It alludes to the cultural agenda of his rebellion.

Arguably, Birsa never let the political substance of his movement eclipsed by its religiosity. The Subaltern historians' privileging of religion and culture in popular movements has been criticized for the reactionary propensities latent it. This accentuation of religiosity, coupled with a downplaying of the politics of people, has nevertheless helped in legitimizing the cultural nationalism, exemplified in the aggravation of militant Hinduism in India. Mahasweta, however, who has received her materials for reconstructing the history of Birsa and his movement from the tribal societies, hasn't let the political content of Birsa's rebellion eclipsed by any other factors – cultural or otherwise. By endowing Birsa's Ulgulan with such social overtones, she delineates it as an anti-hegemonic revolution. Aranyer Adhikar is not the story of an individual tragedy. It is significant that the character of Birsa is developed through his relation to his community. Mahasweta has taken special care not to individualize Birsa to the extent of de-linking him from his socio-economic contexts.
The tribal societies in India are thoroughly disempowered and perpetually maltreated. The extremely abject condition of the tribals in the colonial period is reiterated throughout the fabric of the text. The new laws introduced by the colonial government increasingly alienated them from their socio-economic moorings. They were denied access to the forest which had been the means of their subsistence. The new bills passed by the British government conceded more power and opportunities to the local kings and landlords. The constraints exerted by the system — theorized most trenchantly by Foucault — in effect, incapacitated the subalterns in many ways. In every sense their life is encompassed by utter penury. It is well reflected in Karmi’s words: "[O]ur life has become a torn rag. When we mend it on one side, the other side begins to rip. How can we wear the clothe which is completely torn?" (34) Rice and salt always appear in their dreams. Rice is their staple food, but they cannot afford boiled rice everyday. Rice is a luxury they cannot afford. Salt is very popular with them and they take plenty of it with their food. Birsa’s brother Komatha used to say: "[W]hen I grow up I will bring a big sack full of salt from the shop. Then everyone can use as much salt they desire." (35) The question of survival — both in physical and cultural territs — are woven into the texture of Aranyer Adhikar. One of the most striking characteristics of Aranyer Adhikar is its sustained and uninterrupted atmosphere of subaltern articulation.

Like many tribal risings during the colonial as well as postcolonial period, Birsa’s rebellion in 1899 was also related to land and labour. The
continuing ejection of the tribal people from their homelands has led to many organized struggles in last two centuries, especially in the latter half of nineteenth century. The uprisings of the Kols in 1832, the Santal Hool in 1885, the Sardar movement in 1895 and Birsa movement in 1899, to name a few, had their primary motive the issues related to land. *Aranyer Adhikar* not only marks *Ulgulan's* connectivity with the previous movements, but also implicates its continuation in the future movements of resistance. Even today the tribal societies, throughout the country, are still being evicted from their land. The open end of the text suggests the necessity of engaging further movements of resistance.

Significantly enough, in one occasion or other, every Munda character is shown to be articulating his/her aspirations about reclaiming the customary rights dispossessed of them. At the time of his death Sunara tells Dhani: “Bagvan has told that we will get back the forests and hills of Singhbhum.” (25) He seemed to be cherishing on the dream of recovering their traditional rights over the forest. He went on to say that “[W]e will get every forest. We will also get the land fertile like girls. All the land will be ours. No white men or landlords will be there to usurp the land. We will get everything Dhani.” (25) It is significant that Sunara had come to join the Birsa’s movement after setting fire to the house of Suraj Singh to whom he is indebted through a bond. He, like many other members of his community, was virtually dispossessed of the means of sustenance by the colonial-feudal axis. With nothing but the labour to sell and survive on, the tribals are
frequently forced to the fetters of bonds. As per the contact, he had to serve Suraj Singh in all his life. In return, he would receive a bowl of gruel every day. The text contains descriptions of bonded labour, an issue which is candidly articulated in Chotti Munda and His Arrow and The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh.

In Aranyer Adhikar, Mahasweta has presented Birsa’s mother Karmi with an epic dimension. Being the mother of a revolutionary leader, she had to undergo a series of psychological traumas and tribulations. Her response to the ascription of divinity upon Birsa was an ambivalent one. Like the other members of her community she also had cherished a dream about a bagvan who would be born among the Mundas to liberate them from the shackles of servility and to regain their lost culture. But the sudden ascription of divinity upon Birsa led to a deep psychological predicament in Karmi. Earlier, she was obviously disturbed at Dhani’s constant pursuing of Birsa. Her own attitude towards the veteran rebel was a mixed one. She had a respect for him but she was equally disturbed by the way he allured Birsa to the trouble of revolution. She had a premonition that she would miss Birsa forever, once he becomes the bagvan. However, her fears were later justified. Mahasweta has endowed the character of Karmi with an archetypal quality. At the end of the story, Karmi is shown to be waiting for her son Birsa who, she knew, would never come back.

When Birsa was a child, Karmi used to recount the story of Kallamrna (The Stone Mother) to him. It is the story of a mother who turned a stone after
waiting many yeas for her son, whom certain robbers had kidnapped and killed. Without knowing the death of her son, the mother kept on waiting. The story actually is a parable of eternal motherhood. It is relevant to the thread of the text as it resonates the deep nervous tension experienced by Karmi after Birsa’s death. At the end of the novel, Amulya sees her sitting like a stone statue, waiting for Birsa. It is with a touch of poignancy Mahasweta presents the picture of a devastated mother waiting for her son in vain. The eternal motherhood and its predicament is a theme well explored in many of her stories. Karmi’s extreme dilemma brings to mind the picture of Jashoda, the protagonist of “Breast Giver”, who is compelled to become a hired stanadayini, or breast giver, owing to her socio-economic vulnerability and consequently dies of breast cancer. “Breast Giver”—so excellently deconstructed and theorized by Spivak in the postcolonial filed—stands apart from Mahasweta’s other stories for its apparent emphasis of the gender subalternity. “Motherhood”, according to Mahasweta, “is a great addiction.” She went on to say that “the addiction doesn’t break even when the milk is dry.” (Breast Giver 267) Like Jashoda, Karmi is motherhood personified. The predicament of maternity continues to be a pre-occupying theme in many of the stories of Mahasweta. Mother of 1084, to cite another example, presents Sujatha, the mother of a boy killed in an “encounter”, and her futile attempts to trace the reasons of his enforced death.

One of the most powerful characters in the story is Dhani Munda, the veteran rebel. He has been instrumental in turning Birsa into an adamant
revolutionary. It was Dhani who made all arrangements of *Ulgulan* when Birsa was in prison. In the text, he is depicted as a man with unremitting revolutionary potential. Dhani’s active involvement in the tribal revolution dates back to the Santal *Hool* and Sardar’s *Mulkuyi*. Throughout the story he is shown to be triggering the primal pride of the Mudas in many occasions, thereby instigating them to fight back their oppressors. Mahasweta has drawn him as an archetypal figure endowed with a rich repository of community wisdom. He is one of the chief narrative agents in the story. Dhani, like many other Mudas, was expecting a “Munda saviour” who could liberate them from the manacles of exploitation and reclaim their crushed dignity. Dhani’s life, in fact, was a search for a revolutionary leader. His search for bagvan was an incessant one extended over many years. Driven by a strange hope, he even went to the Santals and Kols in Baganadihi with the expectation of getting a bagvan among them. Yet, he could not find one. But his dreams about the Munda bagvan did not materialize until he accidentally saw the perturbed Birsa roaming inside the forest. His oral narration of the community history traces the transformation which happened in their socio-cultural milieu during the last two centuries. Mudas are basically a farming community from the earlier period. In the past they were happier. They survived by hunting and farming. There was no incursion of outside people into their geo-cultural spheres. But their life underwent a drastic change after the influx of outsiders, foreign as well as native. Those who came from different corners became dikhus. They gradually ejected the Mudas from
their lands by violating their ancient tradition. Gradually the dikhus came to possess all the land. Tribals were accustomed to work as slaves for these cruel landlords. The predicament experienced by the Mundas was similar to the experiences of other tribal communities like Santals and Kols. Often they joined hand together to fight their oppressors. Dhani’s search of the saviour among other tribes implies this connectivity. Sardar Mulkuyi and Santal Hool were primarily against the landlordism. Significantly enough, Dhani’s recounting of the tribal history traces the history of colonialism and its impact upon the life of the tribal societies in India. It is through the characterization of Dhani Mahasweta strikes the continuity of tribal struggle in her Chotti Munda and His Arrow.

Aranyer Adhikar is also about the deep impact of the process of modernization upon the life of the tribal people in the country. Mundas in Chottanagpur, as the tribals elsewhere, have been undergoing the process of detribalization since last couple of centuries. Their culture and indigenous structures of social relations underwent drastic change with the intrusion of various non-aboriginal people into their geo-cultural spheres. Bringing attention to the multifarious ways through which colonialism denigrates the culture of the colonized people Fanon says: “[C]olonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.”(94) The intension behind such cultural uprooting, he alleges, is “to drive into the natives heads
the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation and bestiality." (On National ... 94) The text shows how colonialism, in connivance with the semi-feudal system in India, proliferated the process of detribalization and acculturation in various ways. The third person narrative throughout the text illuminates the social pressures and cultural crisis experienced by the tribals in Chottanagpur. "[M]any people came to their life. Many things came to their life. Landlords, traders, moneylenders, Missionaries, railway, train, roads, guns, bayonets, draught, poverty, statistics, contract, unpaid labour...."(28) Even today, the life of the tribals is enveloped by many hostile forces.

One of the prominent features of *Aranyer Adhikar* is the presence of folk songs across the thread of the text. Mahasweta has woven songs into the fabric of the story. In the novel, songs played a crucial role in instigating the revolutionary spirit among the Munda people. The tribal songs are equipped with a primal rhythm which intensifies the emotional appeal of the religion. In the text, by inserting the folk song Mahasweta seeks to capture the primordial rhythm of tribal life in an effective way. Besides evoking the racial memories, they aid in strengthening the bond among the members of the tribe. They consist of what Carl Jung called the "primordial images" and address the racial memory of the tribals. Birsa's song *bolope*, for example, had a strange effect upon the Mundas. It stresses the brotherhood and fraternity. Among the songs, Birsa liked *bolope* in particular and used to sing it on the occasion of the gathering of the rebels. The Mundas are also shown to be
fabricating many songs about their Birsa bagvan. It was also sung on the occasion of meetings. Sometimes they turned their deep sorrows and hardships into beautiful songs. It is illustrated in the way Munda prisoners sang in group when Birsa died in the Ranchi prison. In short, the folk songs were instrumental in strengthening the attachment among the Mundas during the period of *Ulgulan*. Admittedly, for them, these songs opened up numerous venues of socio-political actions.

*Aranyer Adhikar* offers a powerful critique of nationalism. It is also interesting to note that the waves of Nationalism and its ideals have not reached the tribal settlements. Though Birsa’s *Ulgulan* took place in a period when nationalist movement was gaining momentum across the nation, the tribal communities remained uninformed and unaffected by the mainstream movements. Or the nationalist movement in India did not care to acknowledge these initiatives from the margins. To use the words of Mahasweta, “[Non-tribal India has not acknowledged these glorious struggles as part of the freedom movement.” (Dust on the Road, 108) That is why Nationalism or Gandhism never figured in the revolutionary space of the tribals. The deep anti-colonial character of this rebellion has been overlooked by the official chroniclers of the history of Indian independence. It has to be seen as the deciding feature of elite historiography in India. Spivak observes that “[I]n the case of nationalist movement for Independence it is clearly pointed out that the bourgeoisie’s ‘interested’ refusal to recognize the importance of, and to ally themselves with, a politicized peasantry accounted
for the failure of the discursive displacement that operated the peasant’s politicization.” (Subaltern Studies... 333) Colonialism and nationalism were the two focal areas of scrutiny during 1960’s and 70’s. Most of the peasant movements in colonial India were dismissed as apolitical or as “pre-political”. It is in this context that Guha scrutinizes the problematic of subaltern politics. Guha strikes a clear difference between the politics of the people and the politics of the elites. Elite politics, according to him, marks a “vertical mobilization” and relay on the adaptation of colonial parliamentary institutions. Subaltern politics, on the other hand, consists of a self-directed domain in which the political mobilization takes place in a horizontal manner. Subaltern politics, as Guha claims, is characterized by traditional organization of kinship and territoriality. Consequently, it tends to be more violent than the elite politics. Guha observes that “[T]he experience of exploitation and labour endowed this politics with many idioms, norms and values which put it in a category apart from elite politics.” (qtd. in Chakrabarty 16) Peasant movements and tribal uprisings in colonial India are endowed with an autonomous grammar, entirely different from the nationalism. The mainstream historiographies, by refuting the autonomous domains of subaltern politics, overlooked the discourses of kinship, caste, religion and ethnicity through which the tribals and peasants expressed themselves in protest. In Aranyer Adhikar, Mahasweta, while retaining some of the concepts upheld by the subaltern historian like Ranajith Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty, goes beyond them by rebuffing their stress on autonomy and
religiosity. She presents Birsa's *Ulgulan* not as a self-contained and autonomous rebellion but as a socially motivated revolution. The factor of culture is not allowed to downplay the politics of class.

With the arrest and death of Birsa, the *Ulgulan* initiated by him enters a new stage. Though Birsa died, the revolutionary ideals that he instigated in his people remained alive. By reiterating the persistence of his revolutionary ideals even after his death, Mahasweta suggests the continuity of the struggle by the oppressed people. As Barrister Jacob admits: "[H]is body is perished. But his ideals are very much alive in the minds of the Mundas." (291) Birsa movement was not a failure, though it was brutally crushed by the colonial government. Like any other movements of the exploited, it has retained certain significance. As an immediate consequence of Birsa's *Ulgulan*, British government was forced to revise some of its anti-tribal policies. The Chottanagpur Tenancy Act was passed in 1908. Furthermore, it has prompted many similar movements of resistance in colonial as well as postcolonial India. Jharkhand Movement, for example, was inspired by Birsa's *Ulgulan* of 1899. One of the recent developments of the continuous tribal struggles is exemplified in the formation of Jharkhand state. The text constantly strikes connectivity with other movements of resistance initiated by the tribal communities. There are constant references to Santhal *Hool*, the Kol rebellion, the sardar *Mulkuyi* so on in the text. The Munda rebels received energy from these resisting movements made by their forefathers. The author often intervenes to illumine the undying significance of these counteractions
initiated by subalterns:

No, it was not the whites who won. They did not win all the wars. The wars were won by Santhal, Kol, Sardar. It is because each defeat proclaims a truth. The names of the winners are only in records. Whereas the name of the losers sprouts in man’s blood, treachery, hunger, poverty like in a small plant. Their names spread over the songs, memories and tasteless gruel of these black men (236).

Though the text marks no discernible change in the socio-economic condition of the Mundas after the rebellion of 1899, it implicates the continuity of subaltern counter struggles in the future. Significantly enough, Barrister Jacob reiterates this idea during one of his conversations with Amulya. He told Amulya, who has been totally distraught at the Government’s brutal suppression of the Munda uprising: “[W]e cannot judge whether a war is failure or success on the basis of official records.” (257) After appearing for the hapless Mundas for many years Barrister Jacob is convinced of the inadequacy of British law. Finally, after resigning from the service of the colonial government, Amulya went to Chalakad the native village of Birsa. He reflects “[N]o struggle ends in defeat. It must continue. Because, man remains.” (300) Though Birsa failed in achieving the goals of Ulgulan, this setback itself would serve like a spring board for further revolution with stronger impact. The text has an open end. It stresses the continuity of subaltern struggles.
## Notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aranyajanani</td>
<td>The Mother Forest or Goddess of forest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bagvan</td>
<td>God</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birsaite</td>
<td>The follower of Birsa Munda</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dikhu</td>
<td>Word used by the tribal people to denote an intruder or non-tribal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabha</td>
<td>Traditional assemblage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sardars</td>
<td>Munda rebels</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ulgulan</td>
<td>Armed uprising led by Birsa Munda from December 1899 to January 1900 in the Ranchi and northern Singhbum districts of Bihar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zamindar</td>
<td>Landlord</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Works Cited

Chakraborty, Dipesh. "Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography".


