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## ULGULAAN: A REVOLT AGAINST ENVIRONMENTAL EXPLOITATION

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### Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to study the ecological implications of *Ulgulaan* as discovered in the famous novel by Mahasweta Devi named *Aranyer Adhikar*. The Adivasi people like *Kol*, *Vil*, *Santhal*, *Munda*, *Ho*, and *Sabar* are being exploited by the so-called civilized world in the name of development. They are bereft of their right to the forest, which is essential for their very subsistence. They are stigmatized as the marginal and are forced to leave their natural habitat with the land, water, and forest. However the astonishing truth is that these people strive hard to keep up the ecological balance. They never exploit the natural environment; rather, they fight against environmental exploitation. The *Munda* people waged war against their exploiters through a revolt referred to as *Ulgulaan*. What is *Hul* to the Santhal is *Ulgulaan* to the Mundas. The article explores the ecological implications of *Ulgulaan* as found in Devi's immortal novel *Aranyer Adhikar (Right to Forest)*.

**Keywords:** *Ulgulaan*, Environmental exploitation, Birsa Munda, Forest.

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## 1. Introduction

*“Our land is blowing away as the dust blows away in the storm”*

*-Dharti Aba Birsa Munda*

The history of India has witnessed a decent variety of movements, associated with environmental protection. By environmental movement, we mean a social or political movement that pleads for environmental protection or conservation. The unrestricted exploitation of natural resources leading to ecological imbalance has invoked several environmental movements throughout the country. The *Bishnoi* Movement (1700) Rajasthan led by Amrita Devi along with *Bishnoi* villagers took place in order to save lots of sacred trees from being cut down by the King's soldiers for a new palace. Devi hugged the trees and inspired others to try and do an equivalent. 363 *Bishnoi* villagers were killed and the king later apologised ordering the troopers cease logging operations. Soon the place was declared as a protected area and doing any kind of harm to the animals and trees were strictly prohibited. The Kol rebellion (1832) took place in the colonial period in British India. The movement was a protest of the tribal people in Chotanagpur region as the British profaned their autonomy in their region and therefore there was an intervention of the outside people in the tribal land. The Santhal Movement named *Hul* was led by Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, and Bhairav were brutally curbed by the Britishers. Although a failure, the movement galvanized several future revolts and it still remains as a logo of Santhal pride and identity. But the movement which was wider and stronger in appeal than any other tribal movement was undoubtedly the Munda rebellion (1899-1900). Mahasweta Devi in her Sahitya Academy Award-winning novel had faithfully depicted a clear picture of *Ulgulaan* declared by the *Dharti Abba* of the Munda tribe, Birsa Munda. The clarion call of *Ulgulaan* for freedom of Munda people from the colonisers has a deep ecological significance for survival of the forest itself.

. Liberal arts witnessed rather delayed efforts to trot out environmental issues in literature. The dominant role is being played now by the ecocriticism movement. The ecocritics strive hard to review 'the relationship between literature and the physical environment' as stated by Cherryl Glotfelty, the founder of ecocriticism. According to William Reuckert, Ecocriticism is the study of ecological principles into the study of literature. Ecocriticism explores the interconnections between nature and culture, especially the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land. As a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. The present ecological crisis is the by-product of human culture. In words of Donald Worster, "We are facing the global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them" (Breen 150). Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism* says, "Much ecocriticism has taken for granted that its task is to overcome anthropocentrism, just as feminism seeks to overcome androcentrism. The metaphysical arguments for biocentrism is meant to sustain moral claims about the intrinsic value of the natural world, which will in turn, affect our attitudes and behaviour towards nature" (Garrard 202). Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is an environmental prose that deals with the detrimental effects of pesticides upon nature. Amitav Ghosh's *Hungry Tide* (2004) is a great ecocritical writing in which the writer criticises both the state policies and the capitalist ventures who perpetuate violence on both the marginal sections of the society and nature. Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997) portrays the exploitation of nature by the human in the name of progress and modernisation.

Bengali Literature is also a rich treasure house of Ecological texts. Rabindranath Tagore, Jibanananda Das, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, Manik Bandyopadhyay, Buddhadeb Guha – all have dealt with deep ecological issues in

their writings. Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Aranyak* (1976) shows the deplorable condition of the Santhal tribe due to the colonial exploitation. Mention may be made of Mahasweta Devi in particular who describes the marginal people taking care of nature as they have a symbiotic living in the open lap of nature. Devi had a long interaction with those poor people who lead a neglected life in the Southern Bihar area which now is in Jharkhand and she felt innate with those people. The miserable condition of those people stirred her literary thought too much and inspired her to write an immortal novel like *Aranayer Adhikar (Right to Forest)* (1977). The writer herself admitted in the preface of the immortal novel that she had been inspired by a great book by K.S. Sing named *Dust Storm and Hanging Mist* (1966). It inspired her to write this saga of Munda life. The writer's concern for environmental exploitation by the non-tribal also made her think about the Munda people's miserable plight in the Chotanagpur region.

## **2. Mahasweta and the Marginal**

Mahasweta Devi was a Champion writer of the underdogs. She frequently visited the Jungle Mahal and spent times with the marginal people of Jharkhand, West Bengal etc. and meticulously observed their way of life. Her lifelong experience with the distressed shaped her literary thought and made her unique among the others. She had worked with the Kheria-Shabar in Purulia district of West Bengal. She had spoken a lot about their rights and donated her entire prize money from the Jnanpith and Magsaysay Awards to her organisation committed to the cause of the tribal. As Neeta Gupta observes, Mahasweta's Visit to Palamau, a remote district in Bihar proved to be a turning point in her life. There was no education, no healthcare, and no means of livelihood. People were simply reduced to a subhuman existence. Devi's *The Hunt* is an attempt to expose the miserable condition of the marginal people in various parts of India. Her *Rudali* speaks of the poor struggling people

whose economic condition is controlled by their landlords. But her best novel is no doubt *Aranyer Adhikar (Right to Forest)* published as a book in 1977 as it deals with the legendary tribal hero Birsa Munda and his *Ulgulaan* a revolt to regain Munda people's right to the forest.

### 3. Background of Munda People

The Munda people are the *adivasi* ethnic group of India. They are mostly found in the northern areas of India settled in the states like Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh as well as the portions in Bangladesh. The Munda people are one of the largest tribes in India. The prehistory of the Munda tribe is very obscure. Some Historians, especially the Europeans believe that they descended from Austro-Asiatic emigrants from Southeast Asia. While R. S. Sharma, a historian of ancient and medieval India discovers many Munda, Dravidian and Non-Sanskrit terms found in Vedic texts ascribed to 1500-500 BC. They indicate the presence of Munda tribe in ancient India. According to Munda folklore, their history is too old. They inhabited the hills and forests millions of moons ago when the white man's continent was lying under the ocean. They lived under the rule of Haram Asul who was believed to have doused the fire on earth and gradually created everything. They worship *Singbonga*, their supreme God for their wellbeing. They lived as a community and got plenty of fruits, leaves, friendly trees and animals to satisfy their hunger. Women were respected most and they lived happily with their traditional culture and custom. Nobody imposed any tax upon them and they enjoyed the *khuntkatti* system of cultivation. Gradually the situation changed and the Mundas became landless waifs. The *Dikus* made the life miserable driving them out of their land. The *Zamindars*, *Jotedars*, *Bargadars*, Missionaries and many other non tribal people used to exploit them. The situation worsened during the British Regime as the then colonial rulers used the *dikus* as middlemen and imposed tax upon the tribal. The Mundas were enforced to *Beth Begari* and they were forced to leave their

land. The German Missionary enticed the tribal people for conversion to Christianity. They offered food as bait and many *Mundas* conversed to Christian Religion with a false hope of giving back their land. Most people led a life of abject misery as the Britishers axed their ecosystem for the greed of wood and land and other natural resources. Rice was a luxury for them and they prepared their staple food *Ghato* from Chinese grass and ate with salt. Under these circumstances, the Munda people were waiting for an *Avatar* to save their folk.

At this juncture, there appeared Birsa Munda, the son of Sugana and Karmi in 1875. He was born on Thursday so he was named as Birsa. Three stars illumined the sky during his birth. It was foretold that he would be reborn as the pristine father of the earth. As a spirited boy, Birsa roamed through the forest and had made friends with plants and animals. He had extraordinary courage and intellect. He discovered that forest is a rich treasure house to the tribal people providing them food, honey, firewood, leaves and pure air. Earlier Munda people had no poverty due to a symbiotic living with forest. They led a happy and healthy life until the *dikus* entered their land. The outsiders had made them poor by cunningly snatching their land and forest. Entering forest was forbidden and so the Mundas suffered poverty. Little Birsa was admitted to German Mission for primary education and converted to Christianity. Later he was sent to Chibasa for his upper primary education in German Missionary School. Birsa had a thought that having education, he would get some respect like the Sahibs. The Mundas went to the church for the immediate benefit of food and education. But the missionaries never helped them get back their ancestral land. Rather they helped the enemies to deprive them of their genuine home. The tribal people remained anything but the deprived the Munda. Birsa for his strong patriotism left the Church in disgust and felt the urgency of reorganising the Mundas. He rushed to the forest for solace and in a vision saw forest mother as a naked Munda girl. She appealed Birsa to free herself from the clutches of the *dikus*. Crying like a child, Birsa said to the mother forest, "Must I make you pure again;

yes, you are my mother, the mother of all Mundas. It is you who give us shelters, provide us fruits, roots, trunks, the meat of porcupine, deer, and birds”(Forest/71). The forest was whispering into his ears to save her as well as the Mundas. Although it was raining heavily with lightning and huge thunder, Birsa returned home from forest safely and his supernatural power was established beyond doubts. He declared himself as the God himself who had come to this earth as a saviour of mankind. People started believing in his ability as a saviour of their race. So he made a clarion call of *Ulgulaan*, a great tumult to establish Munda Raj removing the outsiders from their land so long lived by their ancestors. Birsa assured the Munda people that by proclaiming *Ulgulaan* they would certainly win their land and forest back from the non tribals and nobody would be able to defeat them.

#### **4. Nature of *Ulgulaan***

Birsa Munda’s call of *Ulgulaan* had a tremendous response among the Mundas. They called him *Dharti Abba* for whom they had been waiting so long. Birsa suggested religious reformation in Munda practices. He understood that in order to uplift the Munda society they should remove superstitious beliefs. So initially the movement was religious in nature. Birsa invoked cleanliness and asked to give up the animal sacrifice to *Singbanga*. He convinced the Mundas that neither *Singbanga* nor Christ can remove their wounds. Only the followers of Birsa can win back their land from the *dikus*. His followers are termed as *Birasites* and people thronged to Chalkad, his native village to meet with their new God. One of the customs of *Ulgulaan* was to burn fire or torch. Fire here is symbolically meant not to destroy but to enlighten the Mundari people with the spirit of *Ulgulaan*. Birsa asked his followers to wear sacred thread and not to kill animals. He also suggested them not to drink any intoxicants like *Haria* or *Tari*. He also healed some difficult diseases using plants and herbs and people started believing his mysterious power. They sang Munda

songs in praise of their God, danced together to inspire them and vowed to regain their lost land. Birsa also asked people to refuse to pay tax to the British.

The movement soon turned to be political as it was a freedom movement to establish complete Munda Raj eradicating the colonial rule. Birsa moved round in different corner of the forest to hold several meetings with the Munda people. He assured them that no government, no police would be able to keep him under control. He asked them to strike their enemies with their age-old weapons like bows, poisoned arrows, *baloas* (a kind of sharp metal instrument), axes etc. as a part of *Ulgulaan* and they did strike. The British wanted to break the myth that Birsa was a God of Munda people and so he got arrested in 1895 for instigating the Mundas. During his imprisonment, the Munda people got disintegrated; some went back to their root sacrificing fowls and cocks to *Singbonga* again; some embraced Christianity. People began to believe witchcraft. Moreover, the scanty rain in 1897 caused drought and people were forced to borrow from the money lenders who signed mortgage paper from the borrowers for an evil purpose. Thus the Mundari people were on the point of extinction. Discontent was growing and Birsa also sought for opportunities to come. Meanwhile, Birsa got released from jail for lack of evidence in November 1897. The Mundas celebrated his release with drumming and singing in their incomprehensible voice, tune and words. Leaving everything they gathered round Birsa who again took up the challenge. This was a turning point in Birsa's life. People started supporting him with a renewed interest and Birsa called for a total armed revolution. Here again, he got the help of the density of the forest where the Britishers feared to tread. Birsa instructed his followers to make gorilla attacks against the non tribals. Accordingly when the Europeans were enjoying the Christmas in a club in Ranchi, arrows were injuring a few, killing some and fire was blowing at several places including Police Super's bungalow, German Missionary building etc. The trouble soon spread everywhere including Singhbhum, Chakradharpur, remote villages etc. The deputy Commissioner roughly admitted,

“Yes, drought, loss of crops, famine, the greed of the Zamindars, money lenders, Rent Law of Chhota Nagpur; everything supplied fuel to the fire” (Forest/172). The trouble continued from December 24, 1899 to January 1900. Thousands of Birasites including women and children gathered in the impenetrable jungle. They were armed with poisonous arrows, huge stones and other weapons being ready for the final confrontation. When the Military force faced the Munda force consisting of women galore, children tied to their backs, the British captain wanted their surrender. Mundas replied that it was their Raj and not that of the British so they would not drop their weapons, nor surrender. However, they had to face defeat against bullets piercing them and leaving them in a pool of blood. According to media reports, at least 400 Mundas were killed, a large number of detainees died without trial due to inhuman torture in the prison. It would continue without end but for the continuous reporting in *The Bengalee*, *The Statesman* and other papers, the lectures and other activities of the editor of *The Bengalee* and the Congress leader Surendranath Banerjee, and the legal battle carried everywhere for them without any remuneration by the English barrister, Mr. Jacob. Birsa had to suffer rigorous imprisonment in the solitary cell. His death was mysterious as it is stated in a letter by Dr. Amulya Abraham, the deputy superintendent of the jail, who was also Birsa’s childhood friend,

I was afraid to know, Birsa, that when you moved into the room dragging the chain, it was decided to release some Mundas for the case against you would be defeated as witnesses would fail to stand against the cross-examination by the barrister- it was decided that your death of Asiatic cholera would save the government from all harassments. . . . I am afraid to tell you that when you lived on the morning of 9 June, somewhere it was decided how your death report would be written (Forest /218).

## **6. Ecological implications**

The fact is there is a basic difference between the Munda and the British regarding their approach to nature. The Mundas look upon Forest as their mother as they depend on her for their very survival. The Colonisers never tried to learn their way of living. The tribals depend on the forest as they collect honey, oil, dry leaves, fruits, firewood, roots, flowers etc. They never indulge in mass killing of animals; they hunt as much they need to feed their mouths. They even took care of female animals while hunting. By collecting wild fruits and vegetables like *kunda*, wild berries, *telakucha*, *bonkachu*, *amla*, Chinese grass, cress etc. and by hunting animals like rabbits and porcupines, one can live like a king according to them. The plants and herbs like *simul*, *palash*, *sal*, *teak*, *piyal*, *mahua*, *kendu* etc. and drinking sweet water from springs were their luxury. They had been happy with their natural environment until *dikus* or non tribals entered their province to exploit them. The situation worsened when the *dikus* were supported by the British colonisers instead of helping the tribal people regarding their right to forest, land and water. The outside people had a very commercial approach to exploit the land. Trees were never their friends; trees serve them as a source of railway sleepers, timber for ships, materials for making charcoal for newly introduced railway services in India etc. Nature was a victim of the newly introduced Industrial Revolution as the Europeans looked upon Nature as a source of raw materials. They paid little importance to the intrinsic value of nature as they had no environmental ethics. Their sole aim was to profit by destroying the forest replacing the age-old trees like *sal* and *teak* with *Euca* and *Akasmoni* having little significance to the tribals. The tribal people, on the other hand, make a very systemic use of forest land. They made the *khuntkatti* system of cultivation by marking trees with axe to select a plot of forest land to be clear up. After some years they left the place vacant so that forest may regenerate again thereby keeping up ecological balance. While hunting they took special care to hunt a female animal as they give birth to young ones. In this way, we see a pragmatic approach of the marginal who took better care of the environment.

## 7. Conclusion

As an environmental movement, *Ulgulaan* is not a failure at all. The government made attempts to redress the grievances of the Munda people through a survey and made settlement operations of 1902-10. The Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 was established to provide some recognition to their *khuntkatti* rights. To some extent Government also banned beth begari. The tribals won a right of legal protection for their land. But the movement has a far-reaching effect. History repeats itself in the form of *Ulgulaan* as we see in many future revolts like the Chipko Movement (1973), Save Silent Valley Movement (1978), Jungle Bachao Andholan(1982), Appiko Movement(1983), Narmada Bachao Andholan (1985), Tehri Dam Conflict(1990), the Peasants Revolt in Singur and Nandigram and the like. The important thing is a desperate attempt to keep up the ecological order of a particular place to which people are attached to for a long time. The ancient Amazonian tribes in Brazil are now fighting hard against the mining companies as well as the government to protect the waiapi forest. President Temer has ordered to clear up the age-old forest in order to find out the supposed gold underneath it. But the waiapi tribe for their very survival vows to protect the land wearing red clothes and armed with poisonous arrows. The spirit of *Ulgulaan* is still alive as we see in the unrest of Singur and Nandigram. Government is forced to reconsider the demands of the natives and return their land. Mahasweta Devi finds out that *Ulgulaan* is an inspiration to the millions of people who want to restore the natural environment in an age of global environmental crisis. *Aranyer Adhikar* is a great environmental novel fighting for the rights of the forest and its people to survive. Birsa Munda is dead, yet *Ulgulaan* is ahead of time. As long as there is exploitation of forest and the marginal, people like Birsa Munda will wage *Ulgulaan* against the exploiters to protect their rights.

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