Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements

Birsa Munda

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Published: 5th August 2025
Barua, Ankur. 2025. "Birsa Munda." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 5 August 2025. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/birsa-munda

Introduction

In the CDAMM entry on Hinduism, apocalyptic, millenarian, and eschatological ideas discussed include destruction and reconstruction of the world over several cosmological cycles and a form of messianism in understandings of Kalki (see below) descending at the end of the era of darkness. We might describe these as the cosmological 'text.' As we know, between a scriptural template and its sociohistorical location—the 'context'—there is often many a slip. What happens when these Hindu visions of the 'end times' hit the rough road of reality?

We will explore this somewhat vexed question through the figure of Birsa Munda (1875–1900), who mobilised a protest against British colonial officials, Christian missionaries, and local *zamindars* (landowners) towards the end of the nineteenth century in a region of eastern India called Chota Nagpur (Singh 1983; Luker 1998; Singh 2002; Ranjan 2022). Through his *ulgulan* —a word that means 'the great tumult'—Birsa would become an iconic figure whose memory continues to be invoked in the present-day Indian state of Jharkhand. He is the only Adivasi ('indigenous') leader whose portrait hangs in the museum of the Indian Parliament in New Delhi. Born into a poor peasant family in November 1875, he was soon valorised as the figure of *dharti aba* ('father of the land') for his work of mobilising the Munda people of southern and eastern Chota Nagpur, who are today described as 'Adivasi' ('aboriginal inhabitants'). The Munda religious cosmology is populated by multiple spirits (*bonga*), who are honoured or appeased through sacrificial offerings, and they are placed below the supreme spiritual principle, Singbonga.

Birsa's 'millenarian' prophecy was developed from traditional (or 'indigenous') Munda beliefs, Hinduism, and Christianity. This involved the idea of the restoration of the golden age into which Birsa's followers would enter. Birsa was seen by some as representing the highest reality who had come to destroy demonic powers. He presented himself as a messianic figure who would remove the outsiders who had taken the people's land and resources. His cosmological visions about divine intervention in human history were, therefore, synthesised with armed resistance to the colonisers.

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Life

Birsa attended a German Lutheran Christian missionary school at Chaibasa in Jharkhand. During this period, he learned about the basic principles of Christianity, which possibly influenced his own religious cosmology called the Birsa *dharam* that survives to this day among his followers, the Birsaites. He was expelled from this school for protesting against a certain missionary who had described the *sardars* as cheats—the *sardars* were leaders of an agrarian movement aimed at reclaiming land from the landowners. Birsa stayed with a Roman Catholic mission for a while, before, in the words of a contemporaneous source, "lapsing into heathenism" (Ranjan 2022, 1). Next, through a figure called Anand Panre, Birsa was introduced to the religious visions of Vaiṣṇavism, the form of Hinduism with the cosmology of ten *avatāras*, one of whom is Kalki. At this time, Birsa began participating in the *sardar* agitations which were animated by dissatisfaction among the Adivasis regarding restrictions imposed on their rights of possessing land by a regional royal dynasty, local landowners, and traders, and later by British colonial officials. Consequently, a key variable animating Birsa's movement is agrarian transformation—in particular, changes in the land system which affected the Munda social institution of *parha* (self-governance amongst Adivasis) and *panchayat* (village council).

Birsa was evidently a highly charismatic figure. At some point around 1894, he presented himself as a messenger of God, and people began to view him as their high God (Singbonga), or an *avatāra* who had descended to destroy demonic powers. More precisely, he was now Birsa Bhagwan, where 'Bhagwan' is the Sanskritic term for the highest divinity. Stories of Birsa as a preacher and a miracle-worker who could cure the sick spread far and wide. Birsa was able to skilfully synthesise armed resistance with these cosmological visions of divine intervention in human history. These developments are reflected in a contemporaneous report from a British official: "In 1895, the agitation was greatly fanned by a young man named Birsa Munda, then only 20 years of age … he announced himself a prophet, foretold the destruction of all except those in his immediate neighbourhood" (Ranjan 2022, 76).

When, after a series of violent uprisings against the British and decades of petitions sent to the colonial administrators, the Mundas found that their basic source of grievance (the loss of their land) remained unaddressed, from around 1895 they turned towards the intervention of Birsa, who prophesised the imminent end of the current evil age. The Lutheran Christians, who arrived in 1845, and later the Roman Catholics, were involved with the land question. However, the missionaries seemed unable to make progress on this front, and many disillusioned converts turned to the *sardar* agitation and to Birsa.

In the words of a contemporaneous Catholic missionary, Father Hoffman:

> *He made himself interesting by playing the fakir (saint) for some time. I distinctly remember how the known Sardars were urging the common crowd to go on the pilgrimage to Birsa Bhagwan. At first I took no notice of what I considered for some weeks as mere acts of semi-savage foolishness. I did not fully realize the danger of an armed rebellion, because I could not get myself to believe that these people, usually timid under what I know to be sometimes shocking oppression, could muster up courage enough to rise in arms. (Ranjan 2022, 12)*

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In short, the ‘millenarian’ prophecy of Birsa was forged out of the symbolic resources of traditional (or ‘indigenous’) Munda beliefs, Hinduism, and Christianity, thereby giving rise to a vision of the restoration of the golden age into which Birsa’s followers would enter. The presence of traditional themes is highlighted by the fact that Birsa was viewed by his followers as an incarnation of Singbonga, the Munda deity. According to a popular Munda legend, Singbonga was incarnated in the body of a boy, and wiped out the evil people called the Asurs and left the world to the Mundas. In declaring Birsa to be an incarnation of Singbonga, his followers sometimes invoked this narrative. Again, by drawing on the Hindu motif of cycles of time, the Mundas believed that they were living through the evil age. Finally, Christian missionary preaching of the kingdom of heaven probably inspired or fuelled such millenarian expectations.

As news of Birsa’s ‘prophetic’ proclamations spread through the countryside, people flocked to meet him at a place called Chalkad. This fervour is captured in a contemporaneous description:

> *In the meantime, the sick, the lame, … the blind, began to flock to him from scores of miles around. His village is in a very remote spot, right away in the jungle, where it was impossible to obtain any kind of shelter. This, however, proved no obstacle, in spite of the fact that it was the rainy season, and that both travelling and camping out were consequently in the highest degree unpleasant, to say the least. (Singh 1983, 53)*

The Material and the Spiritual in Birsa’s Visions

Birsa declared that fire-rain would descend from heaven and wipe out everyone but those who were present with him, wearing new clothes, at Chalkad. Suddenly, cattle were let loose and there was a rush to the market to buy cloth. The cloth vendors, who were mostly Hindu, made a considerable profit. A contemporaneous report from 1895 reads as follows:

> *The crowd waited in breathless anxiety for 12 o’clock to strike, the time announced for the catastrophe, but as the morning wore on, Birsa intimated that there was some doubt as to whether it would not be postponed for a time, after all. He tied a piece of string between two trees, and forbade any one to touch it. The whole thing depended, he told them, upon whether that string broke or not. Naturally enough, the string did not break, and consequently the world didn’t come to an end that day. One thing which prevented it was that the Sahebs [British officials] had not come to take shelter under his wing. The padres [the Christian priests] were to come first, then the [British] Government officials, and last of all, the Maharani (Queen Victoria). (Singh 1983, 54–55)*

The association between Birsa and the *sardar*s took place against the backdrop of two devastating famines that ravaged the Munda countryside—one in 1896 and the other in 1899. Birsa was released from prison in November 1897 and warned not to participate in any further agitations. However, within a few days of his arrival at Chalkad, his followers began to rearticulate the message of opposition to their enemies. There was a renewed emphasis on the restoration of the golden age of *satya yuga* and regaining their property from the local chieftains and landowners. The Mundas were the true owners of the land, and this

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ownership was not possible in the presence of the Europeans. At a meeting of around two or three hundred of his followers in March 1898, a huge bonfire was lit on the Holi festival. A plantain tree was burnt which symbolised the destruction of the kingdom of the demon-king, Rāvaṇa, representing the British and Rāvaṇa's consort, Mandodarī, representing Queen Victoria. In the Hindu epic narrative *Rāmāyaṇa* (c. 400 BCE), Rāvaṇa is the embodiment of evil (*adharma*); so, through this correlation of 'history' and 'mythology,' the movement was claiming that divine power was on its side.

A contemporaneous witness described a meeting around October–November 1899 in this way:

> *When we arrived we found about sixty or eighty persons assembled. Birsa sat on a stone. There was cloth spread on the stone on which Birsa sat. Birsa sat facing the east and the rest of the people sat around him. About midnight every one had assembled and shortly afterwards the moon rose. When everyone was assembled, Birsa asked what troubles we suffered from. Jagai of Kudda and three or four others whose names I do not know said that we suffered from the oppression of [landlords]. (Singh 1983, 91)*

After several incidents of arson and encounters with the police in December 1899, Birsa was captured in early 1900. He died in prison before trial in June the same year.

Birsa has been presented or represented through a series of different images: as a fanatic, a pseudo-prophet, a false messiah, a dangerous agitator, a freedom fighter, an anti-colonial leader, a martyr, and, of course, as God. Several commentators, both contemporaneous and recent, have characterised this movement with terms such as 'millenarianism' and 'revitalisation.' Indeed, the subtitle of possibly the most comprehensive social history of the movement by K. S. Singh (1983) is "a study of a millenarian movement in Chota Nagpur." Birsa presented himself as a messianic figure who would usher in the establishment of a Munda *raj* (rule) by removing the *dikus* (outsiders) who had appropriated their *jal* (water), *jungle* (forest), and *jameen* (land).

The 'End Times' in South Asia

There are some intriguing parallels between 'apocalyptic' or 'millenarian' movements within Christian landscapes and the agitations led by Birsa. All these processes emerge from within volatile crucibles of material deprivation and proceed through the invocation of a golden age to be restored through human agency, where this restoration is guided or energised by divine agency. It seems that Birsa is himself seen as the Kalki who, according to Hindu cosmology, is yet to arrive. Here is another instance of how Kalki has been 'realised' on South Asian landscapes—when Ismaili Muslims, who belong to the tradition of Nizari Isma'ilism, arrived in northwestern India, they skilfully recalibrated some aspects of Hindu cosmological narratives relating to the four *yuga*s. In their sacred songs called the *gināns*, we learn that the awaited figure of Kalki has arrived as Imam Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad (Khan 1997).

Similar motifs appear in the writings of Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), who is an iconic figure across India, as well as many parts of Europe and North America, in spiritual circles associated with yoga (Southard 1980). However, before he underwent a 'spiritual' turn, he was a 'revolutionary terrorist' and was engaged

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in various types of anticolonial movements in Bengal in eastern India. His ‘political theology’ is suffused with Hindu religious imagery. The nation-in-the-making—that is, an independent India free from British imperial control—is an incarnation or embodiment of the fearsome Hindu Goddess Kālī, and the justification of anti-colonial religious nationalism is provided by an interpretation of Advaita Vedānta according to which all finite reality is deeply suffused by the infinite spirit. In a vivid representation, Kālī goes out to the bloodied battlefield and decapitates the demonic powers who represent the force of destruction; by vanquishing demons—that is, anti-gods—Kālī is restoring the sacred (*dharmic*) order. In the wake of agitations opposing the partition of Bengal (1905), volunteer brigades, gymnasiums, and nationalist societies were organised, and they were directed at physical training and *svadeśī* (‘home rule’) activities.

The nation is therefore an aggregate of finite embodiments of the divine cosmic power (*śakti*), identified with the goddess Kālī for whom an order of ascetics (*sannyāsins*) would be ready to die. This mission of reformation is directed not only to India’s political independence but also to the recovery of India’s status as the world-historical agent of the spiritual regeneration of all humanity. In other words, the destructive aspect of Kālī symbolises the violence that is necessary for the liberation of the nation, which is to be achieved through the heroic deeds of the revolutionaries, viewed as finite agents in the divine play of the Mother (Kālī). Such cosmological imageries were partly shaped by the writings of the Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838–1894), who had invoked Kāli as a symbol of the motherland. In his novel *Ānandamaṭh* (*The Sacred Brotherhood*), he tried to recalibrate the Hindu tradition of monasticism (*sannyāsa*) towards a world-renunciation dedicated to the service of the nation (Lipner 2005). A band of ‘soldier-ascetics’ would practise negation of egocentricity not by retiring from sociopolitical contexts to remote hermitages or caves but through the cultivation of self-negation in nationalist projects of purification of society.

How, then, did Aurobindo, inspired by a quasi-apocalyptic vision of the cleansing and reformation of the world, turn towards a yogic path? Aurobindo was arrested in May 1908 and spent a year in Alipore prison. Aurobindo tells us that during this time he experienced the presence of God deeply:

> *[M]y return to the field of action would not be as the old familiar Aurobindo Ghose but as a transformed being with a transformed character, a transformed intellect, a transformed life, a transformed mind, who would emerge from the Ashram at Alipore [prison] to continue the work on new lines. Though I have described it as imprisonment for a year, in effect it was a year’s seclusion as in an ashram or hermitage. I had been making strong personal efforts since a long time for sakshat darshan (a direct vision) of the Lord of my heart and had nurtured an intense aspiration of knowing the Preserver of the world, Purushottam (the Supreme Person) as friend and master. But the pull of worldly desires, attachment to various activities, and the thick veil of ignorance combined to prevent fulfilment. Finally the [All-Good Lord] removed at one stroke, all obstacles on my path… The British Government’s wrath had but one significant outcome: I found God. (Aurobindo 2013 [1909–1910], 1–2)*

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Article information

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