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Birsa's Legacy: On Adivasi Identity, Land and Rights

INDIAN EXPRESS

11 June 2026

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Birsa's Legacy: On Adivasi Identity, Land and Rights

 The Indian Express

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GS1

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Source: ujiyari.com — Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Birsa Munda fought for land, autonomy and dignity. As debates over tribal identity grow contentious, what does his legacy say about what really protects Adivasi communities?"

 Source: [Original editorial ↗](#)

The Indian Express

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

HOW

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

The memory of **Birsa Munda**, the Adivasi icon and freedom fighter, anchors a debate that has grown contentious: what truly protects **tribal communities**? For an aspirant, this is a rich **GS1 (modern history, society) and GS2 (constitutional safeguards, governance) lead**, with an **ethics-of-identity** dimension. Birsa's struggle was for **land, autonomy and dignity**, a reminder that tribal welfare rests on rights and self-governance more than on identity categories.

THE CRUX IN 60 WORDS

Birsa Munda's legacy is about **land, cultural autonomy and self-governance**. India's Constitution carries this forward through extensive **Scheduled Tribe safeguards**, the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, **PESA**, the **Forest Rights Act**, and reservations. Tribal welfare depends on **implementing** these. Debates over identity, such as "delisting," raise real sentiments but risk shifting focus from substance to category. Rights, not labels, secure dignity.

THE ISSUE, DECODED

ELEMENT	WHAT IT IS	WHY IT MATTERS
Ulgulan	Birsa Munda's revolt against dispossession	His struggle was for land and autonomy
Fifth/Sixth Schedule	Constitutional tribal-area governance	The framework of protection
PESA / Forest Rights Act	Self-governance and forest rights	Substance of tribal empowerment
The identity debate	Disputes over classification	Risks displacing the focus on rights

THE ANALYSIS: WHAT REALLY PROTECTS ADIVASI COMMUNITIES

- 1 **Birsa fought for land.** The Ulgulan was a revolt against dispossession and for self-rule and dignity.
- 2 **The Constitution provides safeguards.** The Fifth and Sixth Schedules, PESA, the Forest Rights Act and reservations protect Scheduled Tribes.
- 3 **Implementation is the gap.** Displacement and welfare shortfalls show the need to deliver on existing protections.
- 4 **Substance over category.** Centring rights, land and self-governance serves the community better than identity disputes.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

Birsa Munda (1875 to 1900), “**Dharti Aba**,” led the **Ulgulan** (“*Great Tumult*”); **Janjatiya Gaurav Divas** (Tribal Pride Day) is observed on his birth anniversary, November 15. **Constitutional safeguards:** the **Fifth Schedule** (Scheduled Areas) and **Sixth Schedule** (certain Northeastern areas); **Articles 244, 330, 332, 335, 342**; the **National Commission for Scheduled Tribes**. **Laws:** the **PESA Act, 1996** (self-governance in Scheduled Areas); the **Forest Rights Act, 2006** (community and individual forest rights). **Concepts:** land alienation; displacement and rehabilitation; tribal welfare and representation. **Note:** demands to “delist” converted tribal members are debated; policy should follow constitutional principle and due process.

THE DEBATE

Argument on identity concerns: Questions of religious conversion and identity within tribal communities raise genuine concerns that some say cannot be set aside.

Argument on rights: What protects Adivasi communities is land, forest rights, self-governance and welfare, not classification disputes that can divide the community.

The balanced verdict: Birsa Munda's legacy points to centring **land, self-governance and welfare**, securing them fully under the Constitution, while approaching identity questions through **constitutional principle, due process and community consent** rather than divisive contestation.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (TRANSFERABLE SKILL)

A weak answer gets drawn entirely into the identity dispute. The strong answer steps back to ask what materially protects the community, here, land, forests, self-governance and welfare, and treats identity questions through constitutional principle rather than political heat. The move is from category to substance. The same lens applies to debates on reservation, language and group rights.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

Birsa Munda's Ulgulan -> struggle for land + autonomy + dignity. The constitutional carry-forward: Fifth/Sixth Schedule + PESA + Forest Rights Act + reservations. The risk: identity/delisting disputes -> focus shifts from rights to category. The course: implement safeguards + secure land/forest/self-governance + handle identity via constitutional principle -> dignity through rights.

THE WAY FORWARD

- ① **Secure tribal land and forest rights** through full implementation of the Forest Rights Act.
- ② **Strengthen self-governance** under PESA and the Sixth Schedule.
- ③ **Ensure welfare and representation** for Scheduled Tribes.
- ④ **Approach identity debates** through constitutional principle, due process and community consent.

THE TAKEAWAY BOX

“The protection of Adivasi communities rests on land rights, self-governance and welfare more than on identity categories.” Discuss with reference to India’s constitutional safeguards. (250 words)

“Birsa Munda fought for the earth, not for a label; Adivasi dignity is secured by rights, not by category.”

Birsa Munda · Ulgulan · Dharti Aba · Janjatiya Gaurav Divas (Nov 15) · Fifth and Sixth Schedules · PESA Act, 1996 · Forest Rights Act, 2006 · National Commission for Scheduled Tribes.

When identity debates divide a community, how should the state keep the focus on rights and welfare?

Connects to GS1 PYQs on tribal movements and society and GS2 on constitutional safeguards for Scheduled Tribes; a probable question is the rights-versus-identity framing above.

static GS1 on tribal movements in the freedom struggle and GS2 on Fifth/Sixth Schedule governance and tribal welfare.

Sources: Indian Express, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, National Commission for Scheduled Tribes

Source: Birsa's Legacy: On Adivasi Identity, Land and Rights — Ujyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Birsa Munda’s legacy centres on land rights, cultural autonomy and self-governance, and the protection of Adivasi communities is best served by securing those rights and their welfare under India’s constitutional safeguards, rather than by reducing tribal identity to a contested religious category.

✓ SUPPORTING

- Birsa Munda’s struggle was for land, against dispossession, and for the dignity and self-rule of Adivasi communities.
- India’s Constitution provides extensive safeguards for Scheduled Tribes, including the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, reservations and special protections.
- Tribal welfare depends on implementing those protections, land rights, forest rights and self-governance, more than on identity classification disputes.


COUNTER

Some argue that questions of religious conversion and identity within tribal communities raise genuine concerns that cannot be set aside.


WAY FORWARD

Centre policy on securing tribal land and forest rights, strengthening self-governance under PESA and the Sixth Schedule, ensuring welfare and representation, and approaching identity debates through constitutional principle and community consent.

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MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

"The protection of Adivasi communities rests on land rights, self-governance and welfare more than on identity categories." Discuss with reference to India's constitutional safeguards. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Birsa Munda is remembered as a freedom fighter, a folk hero and, to his community, "Dharti Aba," the father of the earth. His legacy is a useful lens for a debate that has grown contentious: what really protects Adivasi communities?

BODY

Birsa Munda led the Ulgulan, the great tumult, against colonial land policies and the dispossession of Adivasi communities in the late nineteenth century. His struggle was for land, for cultural autonomy and for self-governance and dignity, themes that remain central to tribal life today.

India's Constitution carries this forward through extensive safeguards for Scheduled Tribes: the Fifth Schedule for most tribal areas and the Sixth Schedule for certain Northeastern regions, reservations in legislatures, education and jobs, protections against alienation of tribal land, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, or PESA, for self-governance, and the Forest Rights Act recognising community and individual forest rights. The lived reality of many Adivasi communities, displacement, loss of land and forest, and gaps in welfare, shows that the central task is to implement these protections fully.

Against this backdrop, debates over tribal identity, including demands to “delist” tribal members who have changed religion from the Scheduled Tribe list, raise genuine sentiments on different sides, but they risk shifting the focus from substance to category. Birsa Munda’s legacy suggests the better course: to keep the focus on land, forest rights, self-governance, welfare and representation, which protect the community as a whole, and to approach identity questions through constitutional principle, due process and the community’s own consent rather than divisive contestation. The dignity Birsa fought for is secured by rights, not by labels.

CONCLUSION

Birsa Munda fought for the earth and for his people’s dignity. Honouring him means securing Adivasi land, autonomy and welfare, and letting rights, not narrow identity disputes, define the path.

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