



1. Did Tribes Fight for Freedom of our Nation?

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The government of India has declared Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav from 15th to 22nd November, 2021 to commemorate 75 glorious years of India's progressive history of its people, culture and achievements after Independence. It is a series of events and includes Kashi Utsav, Janjatiya Gaurav Divas, National Aadi Mahotsav and several others as its parts.

The 15 th November is declared as Janjatiya Gaurav Divas, a part of Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, to commemorate the birth anniversary of Sri Birsa Munda, a tribal freedom fighter and religious leader from Jharkhand and to celebrate glorious history of tribal people, culture and achievements in the making of Indian Nation.

A separate event dedicated to tribal people and to remember tribal freedom fighters, both known and unknown, brings back an old debate to the fore at some quarters. Are the tribal leaders, who fought against the British, freedom fighters? If they are freedom fighters, then whom did they intended to free- their own tribe or the nation? The separate event for celebrating tribal freedom fighters is argued in some other quarters as a preferential treatment envisioned following Constitutional provisions to uplift the tribes and other vulnerable groups at par other communities of the country. The argument further extends to suggest remembrance of tribal leaders together with other leaders who fought for the freedom of the country for a clear message of one nation with different peoples who are co-existing.

With given familiarity of freedom fighters celebrated so far, would it have been possible to give equal importance to tribal leaders most of whom are yet to be known practically at in the history of national freedom movement? Thus, arises a question. Our knowledge in history does not make us confident to give a reply in positive. The reason is the mind set of those who with colonial logic at the backdrop of



their outlook consider tribes as a different category from India's social fabric. Therefore, tribes' fights against the British have been designated as rebellion, uprising, movement, protest, etc. Some nationalist scholar, however, have situated such movements within peasant and social movements category, thereby including tribes in a larger sphere of Indian society. Moreover, familiarity has a strong tendency of not giving entry to new ones into a prestigious category.

Despite apparent reasons and possibility of pushing tribal leaders to a back seat in a general type of celebration, the idea of considering tribes differently stands clear in the event Janjatiya Gaurav Divas.

History tells that several tribal leaders have been ignored and their contributions remain oblivious at national level. At best a few are locally acknowledged. What was the guarantee that these tribal leaders would not have been buried under the glamour of non-tribal leaders, many of whom have been glorified to tallest heights, if they were to be remembered and celebrated in the general Mahotsav?

A separate event to enlighten common citizens about contribution of tribal leaders therefore has its own strength. It is evident from the idea of Jan Utshav as the spirit of celebrating Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav and its part Janjatiya Gaurav Divas in the mode of communication through Jan-Bhagidari by covering length and breadth of the country as announced in the government agenda. Special focus on the event of 15 th November, therefore, may be an effective step to include tribal freedom fighters in the national history and to instill the information people's memory. The history buried so far is given an outlet to become public. But the question remains? Are tribal leaders freedom fighters?

In this context a tribal freedom movement in the present Arunachal Pradesh will throw light on two queries: namely are tribal leaders freedom fighters and would known and unknown tribal leaders be celebrated the way they deserve in general a Mohatsav. The movement and its leaders were not known to the history of freedom movement though the leaders got recognition by the government of India with the award of Tamrapatra a few decades back.

Tribal leaders like Moji Riba, Moje Riba, Ligin Bomjen, and several others fought against the British administration in the area, headed by P.L.S. James Political Officer, Pasighat, who continued to rule after India achieved freedom. He was also the leader to mobilize implementation of Reid Plan of Crown Colony that included hills of the then Assam and Burma. James was removed in April, 1948



due to this movement and the hills of the then Assam became a part of India as Reid's Plan was foiled. The history was silent and people of India were kept in ignorance till a few months ago when Dr.Tai Nyori's book entitled A Freedom Movement in the Twilight was published. Had there been no movement by the tribal leaders, perhaps the geography of India would have been different. Is it not a freedom movement that was kept silent? Is not it a movement related to the freedom of the country?

Two important issues need to be placed in order to justify whether tribes fought for the nation or not. No doubt, some outstanding leaders like Laxman Naik, who joined in Congress movement, have got a place in history. As Congress fought for the freedom of the nation these leaders automatically got a place. But many leaders organised protest at local level or fought along with local kings. There is a debate about bracketing them as freedom fighters of India; the notion of India as a political connotation emerged after the British took over the entire territory by different pleas and direct conquest of states/ communities one after another. This does not mean that the territory of India with its name is a colonial legacy, for had there been no India what territory interested Vasco da Gama in 1497 and Columbus in 1492 to find a sea route? Vasco da Gama is credited with discovering sea route to India though he landed in Calicut. Forget about the accounts of Huensang and Marco Polo about India centuries ago. Forget about Alexander's conquest of India in 327 BC. The idea and territory of India existed even in B.C era.

However, India was not a political entity as we see today. It was a cultural expression of a geographical space; and the political culture was a decentralised manifestation under kings, chiefs, and democratic and gerontocratic community organisations.

Given the ideological foundation of the time, India was not an unchangeable geo-political entity; rather it was a geo-cultural expansion divided into flexible political units, the area of political territory sometimes expanded, shrunked or annexed with another political boundary partially or wholly.

Before there was an all India movement, the British occupied the independent political units one by one. The rulers or the councils of these units fought against the British in order to be free from the invader. All the people, tribal and other communities, fought together. Even history records tribal participation in the battle against invaders; participation of Bhils in the battle carried by Rana Pratap

against Akbar is a case to the point. The Mughals claimed to be the rulers of Hindusthan, i.e. India. To fight against them was to fight for India even though the battle was fought by a single ruler. The political situation was not conducive to fight united as each political unit was independent and sovereign.

A parallel may be drawn. The battle of Khonoma, a village near Kohima, in 1879 with a support of two or three neighbouring villages against the British was designated as Naga Rebellion by colonial writers like Alexander Mackenzie. Similarly, a series of battles, now known as Anglo-Adi Battles, were fought by two or three villages of the Adis against the British. Then why there is a reservation to accept tribal leaders who fought against the British as freedom fighters? The reason is the idea of binarity created by the British between tribes and other Indian categories along the line of Aryan and Dravidian divides; that has captured our mind and imagination even after Independence.

Therefore, some leaders have been ignored, some have been eclipsed by the name of the kings for whom they fought and some have been branded as leaders of local or community uprisings. In the first category we may cite the example of freedom fighters from Arunachal Pradesh who have not been included in the history of the national freedom movement so far.

In the second category we may include Dora Bisoi, Chakara Bisoi, Bhuyian leaders who fought for Ghumsar and Bonai kingdoms Similarly, the Kurichiya leaders of Wayanad who fought for Pazhassi Raja against the British did not get recognition; but the battle is named after the Raja. In the third category we can place leaders like Birsa Munda, Bhagirath Manjhi, Birsa Munda, Jatra Oraon, Govind Giri (Guru), Haipou Jadonang, Rani Gaidinliu and Sido- Kanhu brothers.

The leaders did not fight for the community cause, against exploitation and resource deprivation by colonial agents and rulers, but for its general nature for which they got support from different social groups of the region. It is to be mentioned that all the Santals did not support Sido-Kanhu to fight against the British; on the other hand the brothers got support from several non-Santal communities. This trend was noticed in fights organised by Govind Guru and Rani Gaidinliu. She led three ethnic groups namely, Zemei, Liangmei and Rongmei against the British and for this reason her movement is known as Zeliangrong movement by combining the first syllable of the names of three tribes: Ze from



Zemei, Liang from Liangmei and Rong from Rongmei (Zeliangrong = Ze+Liang+Rong). Even Maram and Mao ethnic groups joined her later.

The 'rebels' of these movements later joined in national freedom movement. The Bhils, Kuruchiyas, Kandhas, etc. who had fought initially also joined national freedom movement when nation got a political shape and meaning.

Freedom movements in India by tribal leaders against the British began at local levels and turned to be a national movement when situation became conducive and the concept of nation emerged. The movements initiated by tribal leaders at local levels corresponding to the then political reality assumed national character. It is to be mentioned that Mangal Pandey did not organise national freedom movement, but triggered it by his individual protest at an army camp. His initiative got wide acceptance, and the movement became 'first national movement of India's freedom'. The same logic applies to movements organised by tribal leaders. The notion of 'nation' of a tribe and rulers of small political units, as can be seen in history, extended over time. It needs mention that a tribe's perception of a country or nation during early colonial rule rightly corresponds to the then existing political situation. It is evident from the book of S.C Roy entitled The Mundas and their Country. The notion is similar to people of a kingdom for whom the kingdom is their desh (country).

The Apatanis use the designation Lemba to denote clan based settlement or multi-clan settlements and even to India in their traditional sense. As they fought for their 'country' at different phases of time corresponding to political India and before, the tribal leaders are certainly freedom fighters of the nation. We have to understand it by understanding the existing political culture of that time. Appreciation of past phenomena with present knowledge is like a square peg in a round hole.