

Capturing Birsa Munda: The Virtuality of a Colonial-era Photograph

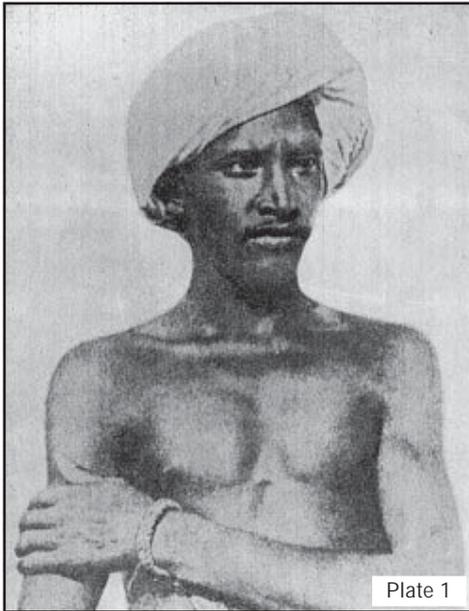
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Abstract: By using the images of Birsa Munda's photograph, copy print of a portrait and poster, this article analyses the historical and ideological conditions that brought about the two-fold capture of Birsa Munda (the anti-missionary, anti-diku, anti-Raj and freedom fighter from Ranchi) by Anglican missionaries and Raj police in 1895 and discusses the dissemination of these photographic images from camera to archive to mass viewership. It cites the writings of contemporary academics and activists to relate the viewing and celebration of Birsa's image to issues of post-nationalism. It also debates the form, meaning and history of this memorializing process.

List of Plates:

1. *Birsa Munda*, photograph in Roy (1912:72), as reproduced in Sinha (1964: frontispiece). I suggest that the initial colonial-era production of this photograph may have been overseen by Rev. Lusty in 1895. It provides the visual material, which is reworked into Birsa's iconography, emphasizing inter-textual links between archival, academic and public spheres.
2. *Birsa Munda*, copyprint of a portrait in Bayly (1990:347), from the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi. The image is used in Bayly's *The Raj* exhibition (National Portrait Gallery, London, 1990) to represent 'tribal rebellion'. It fails to show the handcuffs, and therefore depoliticises the moment of capture. The reworked image both reduces and idealises Birsa's complex identity and legacy.
3. *Birsa Ulgulan Centenary*, poster disseminated throughout Ranchi District (Jharkhand Area Autonomous Council, southern Bihar) by Birsaites in 1995-2000 to celebrate the political achievements and environmental legacy of their Dharti Aba (Father of the Earth). Birsa's presence in contemporary Jharkhand is here

signified by the portrait iconography evolved from the initial moment of photographic capture, in 1895. I debate the form, meaning and history of this memorialising process.



Introduction

One visual memorial for one man's legacy is a neat equation, yet one which deserves analysis. Consider Plates One (page 54), Two (page 61) and Three (page 64). They share an identical subject, Birsa Munda (1875-1900), the anti-missionary, anti-diku (outsider) and ultimately anti-Raj freedom fighter from Ranchi, eastern India. Plate One, a.c. 1895 photograph first published by the ethnographer Sarat Chandra Roy in *The Mundas and their Country* (1912), is the source image for a multitude of reproductions, including the portrait shown in Plate Two and the iconised memorial seen in

Plate Three. Removed from their disparate textual locations, their visual and indexical contradictions become more apparent. Plate One references Birsa's captivity whereas Plate Two illustrates his essential facial characteristics, to enliven Barthes' (1982:5-9) notion of the 'spectrum' or captured referent, which works between the two Plates. This metamorphoses into the effigial 'punctum' motif that signifies Birsa in Plate Three.

An awareness of these images' multivalency requires a recognition of the different discourses, or frames of dissemination, within which they work. Birsa himself, as a self-fashioned messiah, a re-territorialising activist and a colonial subject, may also be seen to work within different 'social texts' (Spivak, 1985:331). Recent scholarship has offered the notion of 'subject effects' (Spivak, 1985:341) to point to the fluctuating predicaments of colonial-era identities; oscillations between and within subaltern (i.e. mass mobilised) and ethnocentric sensual (i.e. demographic) perspectives.

By using these three reproductions as case studies, Part I will begin with an analysis of the historical and ideological conditions that brought about the two-fold capture of Birsa Munda by Anglican missionaries and Raj police in 1895; by being photographed and then through imprisonment. The reciprocal processes of de-territorialisation and rebellion, and of

confinement and freedom, will be pertinent to this analysis. Birsa's own hybridity, in terms of his shifting public image and personality, will be counter-pointed by the Raj authority's desire for fixed individual and social identities as determined by penological and ethnographic photography (see Arnold, 1994:148-187 and Pinney, 1997:17-71). Part II will then discuss the dissemination of these photographic images; from camera to archive to mass viewership. It will locate the visual and political changes that affected the images during their inter-related life histories (see Davis, 1997:7-10 who applies Kopytoff's 'cultural biography' [1986:64-91] discourse to Indian images). The paper will address the contemporary relevance of the issues raised. By analysing the images' sources, it will ask if their new contexts manifest a neo-colonialist recapturing of Birsa, or if the reworked images empower his ambivalent legacy. It will cite the writings of contemporary academics and activists to relate the viewing and celebration of Birsa's image to issues of post-nationalism; notably Singh (1983), Basu (1994) and Appadurai (1996).

Part I

Oh Birsa, they arrested you...

Oh Birsa, on your hand is the iron chain...

Oh Birsa, they took you by Ranchi road...

Oh Birsa, for the land you suffered...

Oh Birsa, you will come back again in the next life...

Oh Birsa, I grieve that they took you away.

(Birsaites [follower of Birsa] song from Singh [1983:281]).

Birsa Munda's legacy is as diverse and ambivalent as his tragic life. Between the polarised perceptions of the Birsaites and the Raj authorities, and their contradicting desires for freedom and confinement, emerge, especially in contemporary India, communities and agencies that have resurrected Birsa's image. Before discussing the visual and political frameworks of this virtuality, it is necessary to historicise the confrontations and ideologies that brought about Birsa's two-fold capture.

The simultaneous immigration of Hindu diku, Christian missionaries, and British tax-revenue systems into the nineteenth-century District of Ranchi became a great burden for its agrarian populace. As documented by Raj-commissioned surveys, this central plateau of the Chotanagpur Administrative Division was seen to be inhabited by semi-savage Mundas: 'The Mundas have lived for ages under conditions ill-calculated to develop good qualities... There has been a continued struggle to maintain what they consider their right in the land... The licentiousness indulged in by Mundas... is of course incompatible with purity and chastity' (Dalton, 1872:205).

Their moral and economic condition was perceived to be frail, generated by an inherent backwardness and an indebtedness nurtured by the diku and the Raj administration. Territorial stabilities, such as the ancestral *khuntkatti* ownership system, were initially disrupted by the advent of the land-buying diku who created a monetised and prestige economy amongst Chotanagpur's indigenous rajas (feudal rulers). The new class-rifts, and shifts in land ownership, enabled the encroaching Raj to first impose tax-collecting regimes and then to govern, police and exploit the territory's resources. The animistic or *jahara* (sacred-grove) religion of the Mundas also provided fertile soils (or souls) for the various European Christian missionaries to cultivate. Mission schools welcomed impressionable youths; Birsa attended the Chaibasa German Mission from 1886-1890. Here, Birsa learnt of biblical myths and of the Jesuits' attitude towards the Munda sardars (political leaders/agitators). Birsa's self-perception assimilated two powerful mindsets; messianism and revolutionary activism. The conflict between the Jesuits and the sardars brought about Birsa's transfer to a Vaishnavite ashram (school/retreat) in Bandgaon, where he learnt of Hindu lores and also experienced a vision of Vishnu. He would later witness Sing Bonga, the sun deity of Jharkhandi Kheroals, and also see himself as a Munda messiah. In Bandgaon, he began worshipping the tulsi plant (basil), wore the sacred thread and dhoti (loincloth), and travelled around the villages with his teacher. These shifts demonstrate Guha's (1983:65-67) discussion on the subaltern appropriation of different or elite (i.e. priestly) clothing styles - such as the pagri (turban) and dhoti - during insurgency movements.

The emerging picture of Birsa as a hybrid personality, eclectic in its multilayered formation and subaltern complexity, differs greatly from the static 'tribal' identity assigned to him - first by colonial counter-insurgency policy-makers, contemporary missionaries and journalists, and later by nostalgic nationalists. During the 1890s, Birsa became increasingly active in sardar politics whilst stabilising his position as a saviour of non-Christianised Mundas. He was branded as a fraud by the missionaries, who dismissed the Birsaites' 'acceptance of this young monkey as [God's] incarnation'; to quote the Society for the Propagation of the Gospels Mission (1895), cited by Singh (1983:224).

Rumours of Birsa's miraculous and prophetic qualities were disseminated by the sardars to foster and mobilise sentiment against the missions and the Raj authorities. Spivak (1985:351-356) discusses the 'rumour' concept as central to subalterns' communication narratives. In Birsa's case, the missionaries' responses to these rumours directly influenced police action. The Indian Forest Act VII of 1882 disenfranchised the Mundas from their natural resources. As part of a re-territorialising strategy, Birsa persuaded his followers not to plant rice, claiming that his powers would

generate the crop instead. This action captured the attention of the Raj authorities who, fearing reduced revenue, warranted Birsa's arrest. Their first attempt on 9 August 1895 failed due to the resistance by Birsa's father and family, who outnumbered Luchman Lal (Head Constable of Tamar Police Station) and his two officers (see Singh, 1983:60-63).

The involvement of the legal authorities generates a triadic relationship between Birsa, the missionaries and the Raj, which is integral to an assessment of Plate One. As well as involving issues of hybridity and religio-cultural authority, this triad represents the dynamics of identity-production at work in the photograph first published by S.C.Roy in 1912. Roy's publication is informed by colonial-era ethnologists and missionaries, and works within an academic discourse of humanist knowledge production. His letter (1912b) to A.C.Haddon, then Reader in Ethnology at the University of Cambridge, accompanied his sending of the book, and points to a network of interests surrounding the publication: 'An expression of your opinion about the book...will be of inestimable value to me. [...] The Hon'ble Mr. E.A. Gait...has been pleased to characterise the book...as "a most valuable contribution to Indian Ethnography" ...'. This politicised academic arena, manifested by Haddon (1911), Roy (1912) and Risley (1915), is comparable to the institutional discourses discussed by Tagg (1988:60-65), which generate the evidential force of photography. Roy's ethnographic publication was an important addition to this growing lust for confinable visual and textual information. Paddayya (1990:132) notes the increased use of photographs in ethnological literature from the beginning of the twentieth century as marking the humanist agenda of the new Ethnographic Survey, founded in India in 1901. The racialised somatotyping that determined these sensual and visual representations has had an impact on cultural fields not directly linked to anthropological enquiry. For example I debate elsewhere (Rycroft, 1999) the importance of ethnicised visions of 'the Santhal' to the modernist artists of the Santiniketan School. Here though, my interest resides in the specific textuality of Birsa Munda's image, and its subsequent widespread dissemination that is not accounted for in the reconstructive methodology of Paddayya.

With a preface by E.A. Gait (a Raj census-maker) and empirical contributions from missionaries in Ranchi, Roy fosters both a primordialist and sympathetic perception of 'the Mundas', revealing his own stance between the ideologies of insurgency and counter-insurgency. The webs of identity-production, and contradictory perceptions of difference-at-work, demonstrate the applicability of notions of hybridity and ambivalence offered by Bhabha (1994:102-122). The missionaries were seen by Roy as 'acknowledged authorities' (1912:viii) on 'tribal' India. Birsa did not have such a benevolent view. Roy (1912:viii) credits three missionaries,

Rev. Dr. A. Nottrott, Rev. Father Van Hoeck, and Rev. H. Whitely 'for most of the illustrations of the book'. It may have been another, Rev. Lusty (of the Anglican Mission at Murhu, near Ranchi), who actually oversaw the photographing of Birsa in captivity for the first time. Following rumours that the Birsaites were threatening to massacre all non-Birsaites, Rev. Lusty reported Birsa's perceived criminality to G.R.K. Meares, the Ranchi District Superintendent of Police. Birsa's retreat at Chalkad was subjected to surveillance. His nighttime capture ensued on 23 August 1895: 'The Sub-inspector from Khunti...entered Birsa's room: he was found asleep, his body smeared with turmeric [a sign of his otherworldliness]. He struggled violently when handcuffs were slipped on his wrists...Birsa was then taken out and marched away without any trouble' (Singh, 1983:67 citing Meares, 1895; also see the Birsaites song quoted above).

These are probably the events directly leading up to the photographic moment reproduced by Roy. It also demonstrates the implementation of institutionalised discipline, as reworked by the Raj police officers, their clinical reaction to missionaries' paranoia, and the moment of capture that generated Birsa's now widespread iconography. Singh (1983:65-70) describes at length Rev. Lusty's involvement in Birsa's arrest and subsequent journey to Ranchi. He notes that Lusty had not seen Birsa before, and that after Lusty's involvement in Birsa's arrest and imprisonment, Lusty himself received police protection. I suggest that Lusty oversaw the photograph in question (Plate One) sometime during the convoy's return from the site of arrest at Chalkad to Ranchi. Roy (1912:324) presents the photograph as following Birsa's second arrest in 1900. Singh accepted this idea and republished it as 'Sick Birsa' to align his illustration with Roy's chronology. Singh also republishes a full-length photograph of Birsa between two policemen, with a tent in the background. This indicates that the photographic moment in question probably occurred on the journey between Birsa's arrest and his imprisonment. Birsa's healthy body (perhaps covered in turmeric) and ornamented revolutionary dress (turban and earrings) also indicate that the image was probably photographed at this time of August 1895. The original photograph's moth-eaten surface may well have come about during the period between 1895 and 1912, when it may have been kept in the institutional archive of the Anglican Mission (whether at Murhu or Ranchi), and then lent to Roy by Rev. H. Whitely.

This conjecture, regarding the timing of the photograph, is important as it directly affects an understanding of the Deputy Commissioner's attitude to the captive Birsa, and also to an interpretation of the photograph's subsequent life history. Rather than becoming an image of a dying or sick Birsa (as would be assumed if Roy's and Singh's readings were accepted), it becomes an image of vitality and divinity, i.e. mobile subaltern resistance,

faced by the terror of institutional capture. As such, its visual successors - the mass-reproduced images published by Singh (1983), notably the open air statue at Ranchi and the Congress Party banners, and the Birsaite memorial in Plate Three - become aligned with both the self-assertive sentiments of Birsa, and with their own nationalist and revivalist milieux.

The British legal and penal codes, however, sought to suppress Birsa's active resistance. The Ranchi police made more arrests, as Birsaite demanded the immediate release of their Dharti Aba. By holding Birsa in captivity, the Raj administrators sought to 'explode the myth of Birsa's divinity and to kill the faith' (Singh, 1983:70). They held an open-air trial so that his captured and disciplined body could be witnessed by his followers. The District Commissioner desired the Raj's legal superiority to become visible through the visual reception of Birsa's disempowerment. Birsa was fined and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. In fear of retribution, many Birsaite reconverted to Christianity at the Anglican Mission. I suggest that Rev. Lusty and his staff captured both Birsa's image and, increasingly, his followers in a project of reconversion that went beyond individual spirituality to extend into socialised hierarchies and community infrastructures.

Whilst in prison, Birsa consolidated his religious, as opposed to political, character amongst police staff. The sardars continued in their efforts to maintain Birsa's divine status amongst his followers by commenting on his imminent resurrection (i.e. release from jail) and on the return of divinity to his body (see Singh, 1983:79-80). This notion of Birsa's gold (i.e. clay or turmeric covered) body vis-à-vis his captured body represents a symbolic invocation of freedom, or autonomy, into the social arena. It also signals the fluctuating notions of presence/absence that are pertinent to an assessment of Birsa's iconography, and exemplifies the role of rumour as a mobilising social text. On his release from prison in 1897 Birsa sought to retrieve his decolonised identity by beginning a campaign of revivalism, which invoked the sovereignty of his ancestors' autonomous control over their land: '*sirmare firun raja jai*' or 'victory to the ancestral kings'. Birsa represented the colonial prison to his followers as the 'whitewashed house' (Singh, 1983:87) - vis-à-vis the clay houses of the Munda and other villagers - which resonates with indigenous perceptions of the painted brick architecture of the landowning diku (see Rycroft, 1996:67-81 for my discussion of mural aesthetics in Jharkhand).

Having renewed their communalist sentiment, the Birsaite began their *ulgulan* (uprising) on 24 December 1899. They first attacked Christianised-Mundas, missionaries and churches, and later the Deputy Commissioner of Ranchi. A bloody confrontation with the Raj police ensued on 9 January 1900 at the Sail Rakab hill, near Dombari. Birsa fled into the jungle, but there were more than twenty Birsaite deaths, and numerous

reconversions to Christianity, for fear of the police's 'reign of terror' (Singh, 1983:128). Offering a reward of five hundred rupees, Birsa was eventually recaptured and sent again to Ranchi prison. This is when Roy and Singh imply that the photograph shown in Plate One was taken. His health deteriorated and on 9 June 1900, Birsa died, perhaps of dysentery and cholera. This official cause of death, as issued by Capt. A.R.S. Anderson, Superintendent of Ranchi Jail, was challenged by the Evangelical Mission of Chotanagpur, who suggested poisoning either by the police authorities or by sardars wanting to keep their plans secret (see Singh, 1983:235).

The resulting trial of 300 other Birsaites became national news, with Surendra Nath Banerjee (editor of *The Bengalee* newspaper) leading the criticism against the British authority's legal cover-ups and delays. He cited the 'heavy manacles' (1900:4) suppressing the captive Mundas, while *The Statesman* of March 25, 1900, alleged that the Birsaites were denied any legal defence. Even though the Calcutta-based Bengali nationalists largely despised the chhotolok - low-caste and 'tribal' communities (see Banerjee, 1989:139-147) - they were swift in mobilising sentiment against the corrupt British legal institutions. In the aftermath of the *ulgulan*, Birsa's re-territorialising motivations were eventually recognised by the Raj administration, in the form of the 1908 Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (see K.R.Narayanan, 1998).

Birsa's religious legacy survived amongst the acquitted Birsaites and is still celebrated today. In India's political arena, his anti-Raj image was transformed into a silent yet powerful icon of national resistance, and more recently has been reinvented as emblematic of a vanishing 'tribal' and environmental heritage. A mass-reproduced poster drawing (Plate Three), which commemorates the Birsa Ulgulan Centenary 1995-2000 in and around Ranchi, shows the enlarged turbanned head of Birsa present amongst a grove of sacred *sarajom* (sal, or *shorea robusta*) trees. Birsa's facial iconography corresponds to the initial image published by Roy. Birsa's visual reincarnation is seemingly dependent upon the original moment of tortuous capture. The virtuality of Birsa's visual memorial, however, enables new subjectivities - those of viewer-consumers - to be created and mobilised.



Part 2

This part aims to discuss the virtuality of Birsa's posthumous image. Although emerging from one image (Plate One), the diversity of the consumption of Birsa's legacy is engaging. The multifarious reproductions of the image should be related to the social breadth of their consumption. Plate Two shows a painted print of Birsa, as exhibited in *The Raj: India and the British, 1600-1947*, a high-profile exhibition at London's National Portrait Gallery, 1990. This copyprint 'portrait' culminates the sub-section 'Imperial Glory and Indian Dissent'. The editor-curator's text concludes: 'In 1899 [Birsa] proclaimed that the Mundas

should fight against the 'Kingdom of the Demon', the British Empire. Following a mass uprising, he was captured by the police and put on trial, during which he died of cholera' (Bayly, 1990:347). 'He died of cholera. Stop'. This phrase, starved of sentiment, subjects 'Indian dissent' to a painless and unambiguous death. In its hollow simplicity, it reflects both Bayly's and the Raj administration's Munda-centric interpretation of the Birsaite *ulgulan*. It continues the ethnographic mentality by differentiating between the well-documented 'peasant rebellions' (Bayly, 1990:347) and the more impenetrable, and supposedly isolated, history of the "'tribal" people' (Bayly, 1990:347).

Having begun life as an evidential photograph, the image metamorphoses, through the copyprint, into a 'rare portrait of a tribal political leader' (Bayly, 1990:347). Part of the legitimacy of *The Raj* exhibition stems from its dissemination of rare and unseen archival material. The aura surrounding the image of the copyprint therefore becomes more tangible even as the accompanying text manipulates the viewer-readers' interpretation into a 'tribalist' frame. Barthes (1982:57) discusses the general relationship between the photographic image and the viewer. Once the viewer's gaze is passed beyond the frame, the representational power of the image's content, or 'punctum', remains confined within the frame. If Plate One was displayed alongside the portrait, the viewer-consumer may have problematised the framing of the copyprint. Roy (1912) was itself exhibited as an object of display. By omitting Birsa's handcuffs the image becomes a dehistoricised portrait. The unknown history that Bayly laments is marginalised as he speaks; as both the portrait and text capture and rework an incomplete image.

The image is presented as a copyprint (slide) of a painted portrait of Birsa. The copyprint itself is housed in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi, and was acquired by the NMML from the holdings of the Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti. I am grateful to the Librarian of the NMML for this information. The location of the portrait itself (as opposed to the copyprint) is not known to the NMML and was not cited by Bayly. It is possible that it is now displayed in the Central Hall of Parliament, as the Birsa Munda Statue Committee (1998) mentions that there is portrait of Birsa in this location. Its portrait qualities suggest that it may have been commissioned by the Government of India for this purpose. This aesthetic aspect is shared by the copyprint portraits of Bhagat Singh - a nationalist 'warrior hero' (Bayly, 1990:339) - and Gopal Krishna Gokhale (a Congress politician) shown in *The Raj* exhibition. The creation and display of portraits of political leaders has been discussed by Pinney (1997:99-107) in the context of Arundale's Nara Ratna Mandir (Temple of Human Greatness), Indore. Pinney suggests that Arundale's humanist celebration of these leadership qualities contributes to the 'complex hybridity' (1997:100) of Indian national identity, and that the viewing of these portraits represents a conflation of a Hindu way of seeing - darshan - whereby the viewer is filled with the essence of the viewed being, with the traditional European way of experiencing the sublime. In the case of Birsa's images, these perspectives differ greatly from the original photographic moment and intentions. The complex hybridity of the images resonate with the diverse contexts of their viewership; from a missionary archive, to academic publications and exhibitions, to India's Parliament building, to centenary celebrations.

Birsa's visual legacy also changes as the photograph is reproduced and repainted. Plate One shows how the framing gaze of the colonial-era photographer is deflected by Birsa. In Plate Two this is less apparent as the portraitist's hand has given Birsa's eyes a direct, almost confrontational, conviction, a quality usually associated more with the photographer. In Plate One, Birsa's demeanour is one of victimised contemplation; his gaze well off to the viewers' right, his brow furrowed. The iconography of subalternity in India here resides in a criminalised body. A revealing comparison can be made with the earlier sketch of Seedhoo Manghee: Chief of the Santhal Rebels, as published in the *Illustrated London News* (1856:200). This 'Santhal rebel' was observed in his prison solitude, brow furrowed, and eyes off to the viewers' right. I suggest that an ideological continuity is apparent, in terms of motivation and imagery, between Seedhoo's [Sido Manji] sketcher, an officer from the Bengal Army, and Birsa's photographic capturer. Only the visual elements are heightened in the Birsa Ulgulan Centenary memorial (Plate Three). In Plate Two, however, Birsa's mythic heroism and healthy complexion are accentuated. His image is resurrected into the half-messiah/half-conqueror iconography that enlivens his popular legacy. Barthes (1982:11) differentiates between the photographic subject's essential (inner)

and effigy (outer) qualities. This binarism is useful to interpret the portraitist's externalising and updating of Birsa's own self-fashioning. All of these images differ from the typical ethnographic politic and aesthetic of framing racial types. Birsa is individualised, initially to quell his mobilising power, then to celebrate his essential qualities of resistance.

The painterly reworking of photographic images is a common practice in India. Whether overlaying onto it, or copying from it, such enhancements of the photograph dramatically alter its biography. Pinney (1990:76-79) differentiates between the ubiquity of these painterly techniques in nineteenth century Indian photography and the European reluctance to alter a scientifically produced image. In the Indian context, the photograph serves as an indexical template to be reworked and reproduced. Pinney's distinction is relevant, as is the aforementioned dual resonance of political portraits, as it indicates a potential multivalency that is absent from the supposed fixity of ethnographic and penologic colonial photographs. All of the images of Birsa could be interpreted as working in and around these virtual ambivalent spaces, and as such respond to their diverse viewership.

Beyond the colonial-era missionary archive, Birsa's photograph enters a new era as it comes to signify, for postcolonial historians, politicians and curators, an afterlife. As Birsa died in prison, this presence has an ambivalence, a transience and hauntedness associated with transmigratory souls. For the NMML and for Bayly (Plate Two), Birsa's visual and ideological presence is immediately recaptured and reframed. Although the historic reality of Birsa's captivity is disavowed, manifesting a point of closure, his apparent freedom signals an Utopian presence that is aligned with his self-fashioning. This reframed effigial presence is also evident in many of the institutionalised and political references to and images of Birsa.

Assimilated into the nationalist framework, much of Birsa's anti-diku sentiment is marginalised. In Rourkela, an industrial conurbation near Ranchi, the breadth of Birsa's legacy is becoming assimilated directly into the 'tribalist' discourse, which reflects both a growing awareness of non-mainstream issues and a return to primordialist visions of the interior regions of India. This process is exemplified by The Birsa Munda Cultural Centre at the Birsa Maidan, Rourkela, as discussed by the Birsa Munda Statue Committee (1998). Images of Birsa now appear on postage stamps, and his name is invoked by groups as diverse as the Bihar Infantry Regiment, the Birsa Commando Force (insurgents in Assam), as well as the peace loving Birsaites in modern-day Ranchi. The appropriation of Birsa's legacy, his image and name, by such different groups (some nationally recognised, others not) demonstrates the multivalency of images and communicative ideas discussed by intellectuals, such as Appadurai (1996:158-177) and Basu (1994:37-45), as manifestations of post-modern and post-national communities.

The academic freedom of decolonisation differs greatly from the imperial milieu of Roy's initial publication. In their different ways, both Bayly's and Singh's publications testify to this. Although reiterating colonial stereotypes of 'tribal' India, Bayly's catalogue is able to draw on diverse sources and critical contributors. Singh's work similarly uses multifarious source materials, bringing together folkloric, missionary and official archival material. The assimilating nationalist slant of his work fails to differentiate the validity of these sources, and does not critique the hegemonic structures that often produced them. His work has, however, seeped into the decolonising imagination of urban India, and has since inspired an award-winning novel, *Jangal Ke Davedar (Rights to the Forest)*, New Delhi: Radhakrishna, 1978, by Mahasweta Devi.

Conclusion

Singh's use of photographs from diverse sources (including ethnographic and travel literature - such as F.B. Bradley-Birt's *Chota Nagpur: A Little-Known Province of the Empire*, London: Murray, 1910) parallels Roy's borrowing of missionary-based images. Their lack of citation of the images' specific sources indicates that the role of the photographs in these texts was subservient to the textual material. However, this paper has attempted to untie some of these assumptions to reassess the potent workings and virtuality of a colonial-era photograph.



By using three interconnected images (Plates One, Two and Three) it has become possible to identify a multitude of potential meanings resonating from visual memorials of Birsa. The historical moment that produced the initial

image was intriguing, as it contained diverse and revealing socio-political relationships. The alignment of the Anglican missionary's and the Raj police's perception of Birsa and his followers, indicates an institutional network which sought to capture and suppress subaltern rebellion. The ambivalent position of Roy in this web of identities indicates the complexity of the colonial-era milieu.

Roy's publication of an archival photograph has renewed the legacy of Birsa in many different arenas. The portrait taken from this photograph, and the other reproductions of it, have led to new contexts of the reception and resurrection of Birsa's ideology. The literary and visual settings of Singh's publication and Bayly's exhibition themselves represent this diversity and subsequent multivalency of the image; its visual resonance and continuing life history. Birsa's visual legacy began in captivity and is reframed in different social and political contexts.

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