

# Communalism Has Been Injected Even in Bread and Butter Issues of Jharkhand

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Credit: Wikimedia

## Caste

In Mahuadand, a town in western Jharkhand, MNREGA contractors' crimes are seen to stem from their religion, not from their trade.



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## Caste

## Communalism

## Politics

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Mahuadand is a nondescript little town in the western part of Jharkhand bordering Chhattisgarh. The town is guarded by the Netarhat hills on one side and the landscape is dotted with stone quarries that employ largely adivasis on daily wages. During sunset, from far corners, one can see fumes from the quarries creating a stairway to the sky. Like most small towns in Jharkhand, the central square of this town has a sculpture of Birsa Munda, the legendary adivasi freedom fighter.

Birsa, also called Dharti Aba or father of the earth, led a revolt in the late 1800s against the British government and *dikus* (outsiders-exploiters). The dikus were mostly non-tribal farmers and landlords brought in by the British to 'modernise' adivasi agrarian techniques. The dikus engaged in land grabbing from the adivasis and became a new class of landlords. During the adivasi rebellion, Birsa is said to have risen and become a quasi-prophet figure. He is believed to have asked adivasis to not be swayed by religious groups and stick to their traditional religious beliefs.

The Birsa sculpture in Mahuadand stands proudly at the intersection of two arterial roads of the town: Ranchi road and Daltongunj road. The sculpture, enclosed in a small circular space has red flags mounted on the circumference of the fence. The colour of the flags bear no allegiance to the political belief that is generally associated with red. These flags are triangular and have a picture of Hanuman along with the phrase *Jai Shree Ram* embossed on one side. There are posters and signs near the main market displaying fervent religiosity by Bajrang Dal, the militant youth wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Since its inception a little over 30 years ago, the Bajrang Dal has been reportedly involved in several cases of riots and acts of vandalism, primarily against Muslims.

There is a significant Muslim community here. Zarina Begum (name changed), who lives in the region, is a committed worker with a state level organisation monitoring the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA). State accountability is of paramount significance for her. A strong desire for justice prompted her to suspend an otherwise busy schedule, to walk several kilometres with me early in the morning to a village. We set out to conduct meetings and register grievances pertaining to MNREGA wage payments, as part of my action research on transparency and accountability in MNREGA across several states.

### **Hindutva symbolism in every neighbourhood**

Upon entering the village, one notices the big-brother-like Hanuman flags that have draped Birsa in Mahuadand towering everywhere. The in-your-face Hindutva symbolism seemed to stand guard in every adivasi *tola* (neighbourhood), irrespective of the fact that there were also many people of other faiths in the village. None of the other religions had prominent public displays. Birsa's call to his followers to observe their indigenous or Sarna faith seems lost today, even though the conditions that led to his rebellion a little over a century ago don't seem to have altered. While exact figures are unavailable, the village has about 35% Christians, 20% Hindus, 15-20% Muslims, and about 10-15% adivasis believing in the Sarna faith. The main adivasi groups here are Oraons, Nagesias, and a smattering of Birjias.

### **Corruption in MNREGA**

In the entire block, there are about 10,000 MNREGA workers, of which around 6,200 are from adivasi households, 300 odd from Dalit households and the rest from the 'other' category. The main kinds of work include the construction of farm ponds, wells, road construction and land levelling.

As we started reading out the names of people who were supposed to have worked and received wages in the village, most of them cried foul saying that they never got the wages. Some of them had received partial payments while some others were given five kilograms of rice for work done under the MNREGA, supervised by private contractors. On discovering how they were being cheated, the simmering anger among the extremely poor adivasi workers was palpable. As Zarina Begum educated them about their rights and entitlements, she urged them to come forward and register their complaints against the local contractors. She knew who those contractors were but has lacked support in her endeavours to bring about justice. "Those contractors are making money in your name. You are being used by somebody else and you don't even know that. How can you be silent?", she said while addressing the villagers.

After several hours of meetings, we temporarily parked ourselves with a few others from the village in a Hindu adivasi household. Discussions ensued on a range of topics. Unaware of Zarina Begum's religious affiliation, one of them said, "*Yeh Musalmanon ne tang kar rakha hai yahan*" (These Muslims have created trouble here) referring to one of the contractors who happened to be Muslim. Zarina Begum sat there silently, nodding in agreement with what he was saying. Sitting opposite me, Pramila Devi, a resident of the village and not affiliated with any specific group, responded saying "It doesn't matter that they are Muslims. There are Hindu contractors too. What matters is that they are contractors in MNREGA and we should not let that happen." Zarina Begum was quiet during this conversation. When I asked her later how she felt about the remarks about the Muslim contractor, she responded nonchalantly, "*Usko kitna taqleef hua hoga woh kehne mein. Yeh thekedar log jo zulm karte hain, woh dharm nahin dekhte hain. Woh sirf dekhte hain ki kaise gareebon ko looten*" (How much pain would have prompted him to say such a thing? These contractors who exploit, don't care about the religion of the exploited. They only think about exploiting the poor).

A day later, I got a call from a friend in Delhi asking if things were alright where I was. I didn't understand the reason for the question. She then told me about the four Muslim men who were recently lynched in another part of Jharkhand on the grounds of being child lifters. Notwithstanding that child trafficking is indeed a genuine concern in Jharkhand, the repeated stories of lynching left me shocked, upset and angry. A balance sheet of accusations drawn on religious grounds alone – when the crime is a secular one – is extremely disquieting. I worried whether one might be seeing a similar pattern emerge in Mahuadand – where contractors' crimes are seen to stem from their religion, and not from their trade. Despite there being a salad of multiple religions here, it is only Hindutva which is visible. This is not just incongruous but also scary. I immediately wondered how Zarina Begum continues to maintain her resolve for justice in such a high strung atmosphere.

In a later conversation with Zarina Begum, I asked her if she isn't scared of working on people's rights in such an environment. She responded in her characteristic casual yet resilient manner – "*Dar kyon hoga? Mujhe koi dar nahin. Main to bas yehi chahti hun ki logon ko unka haq mile. Haq to Hindu ya Musalman nahin hota, na?* (Why should I fear? I am not scared. I just want everybody to get their rights. Rights per se are neither Hindu nor Musalman, no?)"

While Zarina Begum battles to get rights for all, Hindutva forces appear to be injecting a slow poison where Muslims can become easy targets in the process – either when they demand their rights or when rights are being demanded against them. Do the same rights lose their importance when made against the state or Hindu contractors?

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