Subnationalism, Identity and the Political Economy of Statehood: The Case of Jharkhand

Vivek Kumar Hind

Assistant Professor, University Department of Political Science
T. M. Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur Bihar

ABSTRACT

The creation of Jharkhand as a separate state in 2000 was the culmination of a long-standing movement rooted in historical, cultural, and socio-economic grievances of the indigenous Adivasi communities. This paper explores the conceptual foundations of the Jharkhand statehood movement, situates it within the broader context of regionalization in post-independence India, and examines the articulation of a distinct Jharkhandi identity. It further analyzes the evolution of statehood demands, the persistent challenges facing tribal communities, and the ongoing struggle for meaningful autonomy and development. The study draws on historical records, policy documents, and recent socio-economic data to assess the extent to which the aspirations of Jharkhand's tribal population have been realized.

1. Introduction:

The demand for a separate Jharkhand state emerged from a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. At its core, the movement was an assertion of subnationalism and identity politics, with the construction of a distinct "Jharkhandi" identity centered on the indigenous (Adivasi) communities inhabiting the Chota Nagpur Plateau and adjoining regions. These communities, bound by common languages, customary laws, and forest-based traditions, sought recognition and autonomy in the face of persistent marginalization.

2. Conceptualizing the Jharkhand Movement

Subnationalism and Identity Politics

The Jharkhand movement is best understood through the frameworks of subnationalism and identity politics. The region's Adivasi communities—speaking languages such as Santali, Mundari, and Ho—possess unique customary laws and community ethos. The Bhuria Committee (1994) highlighted these "unique characteristics" as essential considerations for governance. Historically, references to "Jharkhand" as a distinct region date back to Mughal records of the sixteenth century, which described the hilly, forested lands of Chota Nagpur as "forest country." During colonial rule, the region's mineral wealth and dense forests were recognized, and its inhabitants governed under special legal provisions.

Constitutional Recognition and Adivasi Self-Determination

Post-independence, the Indian Constitution's Fifth Schedule (1950) designated the Chota Nagpur and Santhal Parganas areas as "Scheduled Areas," intended to protect tribal interests. The conceptual foundation of the Jharkhand movement thus rested on the principle of Adivasi self-determination—the belief that the "original dwellers" of the land should have the right to govern their own affairs and safeguard their culture. However, the failure of mainstream development and governance in these areas after independence exacerbated a sense of exclusion and discontent among the tribal population.

3. Regionalization Movements in India:

Historical Context of State Reorganization

The Jharkhand statehood demand was part of a broader trend of regionalization in post-independence India. The early decades witnessed the reorganization of states along linguistic lines, most notably through the States Reorganisation Act of 1956. In subsequent decades, movements

invoking ethnic, tribal, or regional identities—rather than language alone—gained momentum, leading to the creation of new states such as Nagaland (1963), Punjab (1966), and eventually Meghalaya.

The Wave of New States in 2000:

By the late twentieth century, demands for separate status intensified in regions considered peripheral to large states. The formation of Jharkhand, alongside Uttarakhand and Chhattisgarh in 2000, reflected a political consensus that economically and culturally distinct regions required separate administration. The process was notably peaceful and bipartisan, with the Vajpayee government overseeing the creation of three new states in a single parliamentary session. This trend continued with the creation of Telangana in 2014 and ongoing demands for other regional entities, illustrating the evolving nature of India's federal structure.

4. The Construction of Jharkhandi Identity

Tribal Heritage and Historical Resistance

Central to the Jharkhand movement was the articulation of a Jharkhandi identity, rooted in the indigenous heritage of the region. The principal tribes—Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, Kharias, and Hos—shared a legacy of resistance to external domination, epitomized by figures like Birsa Munda, whose late-nineteenth-century uprising against British encroachment became a symbol of Jharkhand nationalism. The celebration of statehood on Birsa's birth anniversary underscores his enduring significance.

Linguistic, Cultural, and Social Distinctiveness

Jharkhand's tribes maintain traditions, languages, and belief systems distinct from the Indo-Aryan culture of the Bihar plains. The term "Adivasi" ("original dwellers") is used to emphasize their priority claim to the land, and customs such as Khuntkati (communal landholding) reflect a preference for self-governance. Scholars note that the idea of a unified Jharkhand ethnicity was constructed during the colonial period and asserted more forcefully in the post-colonial era, with leaders like Jaipal Singh Munda framing the region as a "nation of tribes."

Pluralism and Populism:

While the movement was overwhelmingly tribal, it attracted support from non-tribal groups who identified with the narrative of underdevelopment. Christianized tribals, who played a prominent role in early organizations, sometimes led to tensions along religious lines, but the dominant discourse framed the struggle as one of "Adivasis versus Dikus" (outsiders), emphasizing cultural and economic exploitation over religious differences. The broad conception of Jharkhandi identity allowed mainstream political parties to champion statehood on a secular basis, even as tribal foundations remained central.

5. The Evolution of Statehood Demands

Early Proposals and Political Mobilization

The organized demand for a separate Jharkhand state evolved over nearly a century. Initial proposals emerged in the colonial era, with memoranda presented to the Simon Commission in 1928. After independence, Jaipal Singh Munda and the Jharkhand Party formally petitioned the States Reorganisation Commission in 1955, citing historical neglect and cultural distinction. Although the proposal was initially rejected, the Jharkhand Party became a significant political force in Bihar, advocating for tribal interests.

Fragmentation and Renewed Agitation:

The merger of the Jharkhand Party with the Indian National Congress in 1963 led to disillusionment among tribal voters and a temporary loss of momentum. However, the late 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of new organizations such as the All-Jharkhand Students Union (AJSU) and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), which mobilized mass protests and, at times, resorted to militancy. The late 1980s and 1990s provided a favorable national context for state bifurcation, and by 2000, political consensus enabled the creation of Jharkhand as India's.

Core Grievances and Aspirations:

Throughout this history, the demand for statehood was animated by grievances over regional underdevelopment, social injustice, and perceived domination by non-tribal interests. Despite the region's mineral wealth, locals suffered from poor infrastructure, limited access to education and health services, and high poverty. The movement combined tribal assertions with populist appeals for justice and development, setting the benchmarks by which the new state would be judged.

6. Post-Statehood Realities: The Condition of Jharkhand Tribes

Persistent Socio-Economic Challenges

The creation of Jharkhand raised hopes for progress among its tribal population, but structural challenges have persisted. Recent studies reveal that average annual household incomes among tribal families remain significantly below the national rural average, with many households' dependent on subsistence agriculture and forest gathering. Literacy, nutrition, and healthcare indicators remain poor, underscoring continued deprivation.

Land Rights, Displacement, and Exploitation

Geographical and historical factors, including forested and hilly terrain, have limited agricultural productivity. Decades of conflict over land rights have accompanied development projects, with many tribal villagers displaced by dams and mining operations without adequate rehabilitation. Despite constitutional safeguards such as the Fifth Schedule and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), the state has largely failed to protect tribal land and resources. The extraction of mineral wealth by external actors has fueled a sense of exploitation and contributed to social unrest.

Insurgency and State Response:

The economic marginalization of tribal communities has made Jharkhand a hotspot for Left-wing extremism, with disaffected youths drawn to Maoist insurgency. The state's response has often been heavy-handed, exacerbating human rights concerns and perpetuating a cycle of violence and alienation.

Symbolic Recognition and Policy Interventions

Despite these challenges, there have been efforts to recognize and promote tribal heritage, such as the renaming of the state university after Ramdayal Munda and the celebration of Birsa Munda's birthday as a national tribals' day. Pro-tribal schemes, including scholarships and forest-dividend payments, have been implemented, but activists argue that substantive change requires effective control over land and resources and the full implementation of protective legislation.

7. Conclusion:

The Jharkhand statehood movement exemplifies the interplay of subnationalism, identity politics, and the political economy of development in India. While the creation of Jharkhand represented a significant achievement for its tribal communities, the persistence of socio-economic deprivation, land alienation, and political marginalization highlights the limitations of statehood as a solution. The ongoing struggle for autonomy, resource control, and cultural preservation underscores the need for more inclusive and responsive governance. Only through the genuine empowerment of indigenous communities and the realization of their rights can the aspirations of the Jharkhand movement be fulfilled.

Jharkhand's future is not predetermined by its past of extraction and displacement. By embracing inclusive, sustainable, and rights-based development, the state can become a model for equitable growth in India. The empowerment of tribal women, recognition of indigenous knowledge, and protection of natural and cultural heritage are not only ethical imperatives but also practical strategies for prosperity. The path forward requires political will, community participation, and a reimagining of development that places people and the environment at its center.

References:

1. Singh, K. S. (1982). Tribe, Caste and Peasantry. Manohar.

2. Shah, G. (2001). Social Movements in India: A Review of Literature. SAGE Publications.

3. Sinha, S. (2003). State formation and the construction of Jharkhandi identity. Economic and Political Weekly, 38(52), 5517-5522.

4. Xaxa, V. (1999). Tribes as indigenous people of India. Economic and Political Weekly, 34(51), 3589-3595.

5. Guha, R. (1999). Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India. University of Chicago Press.

6. Munda, R., & Bosu Mullick, S. (2003). The Jharkhand Movement: Indigenous Peoples' Struggle for Autonomy in India. International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs.

7. Fernandes, W. (2007). Singur and the displacement scenario. Economic and Political Weekly, 42(3), 203-206.

8. Baviskar, A. (1995). In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley. Oxford University Press.

9. Government of India. (1996). The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA). Ministry of Law and Justice.

10. Austin, G. (1999). Working a Democratic Constitution: The Indian Experience. Oxford University Press.

11. Rao, M.G., & Singh, N. (2005). The political economy of federalism in India. Oxford University Press.

12. Planning Commission. (2008). Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas: Report of an Expert Group. Government of India.

✦ ✦ ✦