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Bhima Bhoi on Women Emancipation

Abstract

This article is a critical analysis of Bhima Bhoi's writings on women emancipation. It tries its best to present Bhoi's views on women's rights in Nineteenth century. He believed that men and women must be given equal rights and privileges as both are creation of Brahma. For this purpose, some works like *Stuti Chintamani*, *Bhajan Mala*, *Astaka Bihari Gita* have been taken for literary analysis. In these works, Bhoi has strived to emancipate women from their inferior status. He has fought for the rights and liberties of women and has preached that Mahima Dharma doesn't differentiate between men and women and in fact has initiated many women into the fold of Mahima Dharma.

Keywords: Sexual Violence, Women's Rights, Discrimination, Female Infanticide, Upliftment.

Introduction

Padmashree Laxminarayan Sahoo, eminent writer, social worker and reformer observes that the ancient history of Oriya women was much brighter than that of the present period beginning from 1900. The status of women in Orissa suffered as a result of the advent of the alien rule. The social and religious laws and customs gradually became hostile for women class. Many restrictions were imposed on them which affected their social status. Gradually, polygamy, child marriage, female infanticide, Sati, etc. became a way of life in Orissa. The rule of the Muslims and the Marathas struck terror in the minds of the people. The women became completely subjugated to their men in the society where conservatism, casteism, female infanticide, child marriage, sati, polygamy, purdah, illiteracy and other social evils had taken deep roots. The structure remained the same until the arrival of the British in Orissa in the early nineteenth century. The history of the women in Orissa underwent some changes after the British rule was firmly established in the country.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is to bring forth the writings of Bhima Bhoi who through his verses fought intensely against various social evils and tried to uplift the condition of the downtrodden especially the women. The social and religious laws and customs in the nineteenth century was hostile for women class. Many restrictions were imposed on them which affected their social status. Polygamy, child marriage, female infanticide, Sati, etc. became a way of life in Orissa. The rule of the Muslims and the Marathas with their ruthless loot, plunder, and capture of women struck terror in the minds of the people. To save the honor of the women-folk, the social laws and norms concerning them became more rigid and these became the instruments for their social degradation. They became completely subjugated to their men in the society. Bhima through his writings fought against the atrocities committed against the women of the nineteenth century.

Review of Literature

Tandra Patnaik in her book *God as Sunya: The Philosophy of Mahima Dharma and Bhima Bhoi* (2016) discusses primarily the philosophy and the tradition of Mahima Dharma which was "the last and the latest movement of post-classical phase as it came to the fore during 1860s"(11). She discusses on the plight of women in Orissa and the discrimination they faced at the hands of their male counterpart. She also explores the contribution of Bhima Bhoi towards the spreading of Mahima Dharma and holds him as the vanguard of Mahima literature

The book *Bhima Bhoi: Verses from the Void, Mystic Poetry of an Oriya Saint* (2010) edited by Bettina Baumer and Johannes Beltz is the first representative and comprehensive anthology on Bhima Bhoi and contains translations of certain important works of Bhoi. It is the first ever made critical edition on Bhoi discussing the poet and his works in its social, religious, and philosophical contexts.



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Main text of paper

As early as 1836 the Baptist missionaries took steps to teach girls in their schools. The missionary education aimed at both moral enlightenment and economic security. Girls were taught many useful things connected with domestic economy which would help them in life. In 1850 an orphanage-cum-school was set up by Mrs. Buckley in Cuttack and by 1850 there were few missionary schools in Cuttack and Balasore where the girls received their education. The initiative taken by the Christian missionaries exercised great influence on many Oriya gentlemen, who gradually became more interested in women's education. Among them were Madhusudan Das, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Gauri Shankar Ray, Madhusudan Rao, Biswanath Kar, Abhinav Chandra Chatterjee, Jagan Mohan Lala, Ram Sankar Ray and Naba Kishore Das. Many periodicals came into existence in the wake of the literary awakening and noteworthy contributions were made by newspapers like Utkal *Dipika*, *Sambalpur Hiteisini*, *Balasore Sambad Bahika* and *Utkal Sahitya*. At the same time, an indigenous cult known as Mahima Dharma made its appearance under the leadership of Mahima Swami and propagated by Bhima Bhoi. During this critical time of dominance and hegemony, Bhima Bhoi was a ray of hope who appeared as a blessing to the countless, blind-folded and unfortunate common people. The emergence of Mahima Dharma not only brought various changes in the social and religious sphere of Orissa but most importantly uplifted the degraded condition of the oppressed and the marginalized section of Orissa. The popularity of Mahima Dharma was such that one-sixth of the population of Orissa and Chhattisgarh Garjhat division especially the lower strata of the society were initiated into this new revolutionary religion. A major portion of Orissa from Jeypore to Sambalpur was populated by the devotees of Lord Mahima. Mahima Dharma emerged as the religion of the downtrodden and oppressed segment of the society. Johannes Beltz and Kedar Mishra in their article "Ascetic, Layman or Rebellious Guru" write: "Mahima Dharma conferred on subordinate people – women and untouchables – a new sense of dignity that enabled them to question the discrimination inherent in Brahmanical hinduism." (131)

Bhima Bhoi, the exponent and the foremost poet of Mahima Dharma, in his *Stuti Chintamani* 92/1 affirms that:

All men and women belonging to thirty-six clans and fifty-two profession should take refuge in the name of Almighty shading aside any superior and inferior complexity.

(Trans.; Bahinipati 86)

All the men and especially women who were not included in the rituals and worship of the high caste Hindus and to whom the entry in temples were denied got access to worship in Mahima Dharma. Bhima Bhoi was the hero propagating the glory of Mahima Swami among the

villagers to such an extent that many believed that Bhima was the expounder of Mahima Dharma. Indeed, a number of women received initiation directly from Mahima Swami at Malbiharpur, which was the primary seat of Mahima Dharma. It also had a 'matha' (monastery) for women. Beltz and Mishra had conducted an interview with, Rabindra Nath Rana in March 2001 and stated in their article:

A Karana girl came to the Malbiharpur 'asrama' (sanctuary) for 'darsana' (sight) of Mahima Swami and was later ostracized by her family. This girl took refuge at the feet of the Guru. The Lord himself commanded her to stay in the 'asrama'. Her son Brindaban Das became an enlightened sannyasi. (132)

The newspaper *Mukura*, in December 1907-January 1908 also suggests that Mahima Swami had women disciples among his companions. It reported that the *sannyasis* who wear loin cloth are found having their wives with them but they do not stay in their houses. These were the *grhi* section of Mahima devotees who can be followers of the dharma even though they are married. They are not required to renounce their worldly life but can follow Mahima religion as a devotee. It was also confirmed by the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1882 that there were *babas* (*sannyasi*) and *mata's* (*sannyasins*) in both the ascetic group of *kumbhipatias* and *Kanapatias*.

The fairness and non-discrimination meted out by Mahima Dharma to women resulted in its social disparaging by the rest of Oriya society. The spread of Mahima Dharma seems to have infuriated the high conservative Hindus. The *Utkala Sahitya* newspaper in 1883 opined that Mahima Dharma was resented as anti-Brahmin, heathen and anti-royal. It was anti-Brahmin as Mahima dharma gained momentum because of its revolt against the Brahminical order that perpetuated discrimination in the society. It was heathen and anti-royal because only the low caste people and *adivasis* were its devotees who despite being *sannyasis* cohabited with their wives. The Brahmins and the Rajas were excluded from this dharma. A follower or a devotee of a certain religion needs to give up his worldly life and seek God but in the *grhi* section, the devotee continued to be a householder and also a *sannyasis*. This shows the liberal, progressive and open-minded attitude of the Mahimaites unlike the rigid and unchangeable rules enforced by Hinduism. Writings that are extremely critical of Mahima Dharma, Mahima Swami and Bhima Bhoi appeared in several magazines and newspapers of the time demanding the prosecution of Mahima Swami for causing social indiscipline. The British Government considered these demands and directed the District Magistrates to keep vigilance on the followers of Mahima Dharma.

The official report of the Superintendent of Police of Puri regarding the attack on Jagannath Temple on March 1, 1881 establishes the fact that women had actively started taking part in liberating themselves. Among the attackers there were women who were arrested near Sakhigopal. The women had entered the premises of the temple of Lord Jagannath

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holding babies in their arms to burn down the wooden idol of Jagannath. This incident had added a new chapter in the history of Orissa. Women acting as rebels in the then society was a tremendous achievement on part of Bhima Bhoi to emancipate them. Ishita Banerjee in her *Religion, Law and Power* states: "The attack on Puri was only a protest against the hegemony of Puri's Brahminic culture and social discrimination launched by a rather militant branch of the Mahima movement, not an attack on Jagannath" (56).

The women were ready to claim what was rightfully theirs. The caste system and the Brahmins had secluded and isolated them making them live a withdrawn and solitary life. Their role was confined to the house only. But with the rise and spread of Mahima Dharma, women had taken the vital and active role of rebels challenging their position in society. They will no longer listen to the dictates of the male dominated Brahmin society but will strive and pursue their rights and entitlements. It was the call for their freedom and they were responding to it. The liberal call of Mahima Dharma made a lot of women leave their home and inspired them to become the disciple of Mahima Swami and Bhima Bhoi.

Authentic historical sources are almost non-existent on Bhima Bhoi as a person and there are large number of stories and legends surrounding him. His origin or his blindness has been a matter of scholarly and academic discussion and there is no solution to these debates. Even a crucial theme of Bhima Bhoi's relation to women has been open to various interpretations. It is widely accepted that Bhima Bhoi lived with four women, "two 'worldly' and two 'spiritual' consorts" (Dube and Beltz 133) and to comprehend this we need to look into the various instances where Bhima deals and interacts with women.

It is said that Bhima Bhoi moved to Gurunda, a place situated near the small town of Binka in today's Sonepur district. It was there that Mohan Das, a certain Vaisnava, accepted Bhima Bhoi as his Guru and offered his daughter Sumedha at the feet of Bhima Bhoi as his devotion. Ramesh Samantary in his *Odiya Sahityare Bhima Bhoi* states: Sumedha's father Mohan Das was attracted towards the Mahima cult. He came from a Vaisnava family of the village Ragapali of the present Bolangir district. Daya Sagar Das from Khaliapali confirms that when Bhima Bhoi was staying at the village Bhurusrapali, Mohan Das offered him Puja, as if he was his guru. He also offered his daughter Sumedha, who was only seven years old to Bhima Bhoi. She would have to serve him, providing seva to the guru. (21)

Following his example, Mohan Das's brother-in-law, Narayan Das also offered his daughter Rohini to Bhima Bhoi. Samantray continues: Narayan Das of the village Kudasingha (Bolangir district), the brother-in-law of Mohan Das, was the greatest devotee of the Dharma. In other words, like his brother-in-law he was attracted towards Mahima Dharma. Narayan Das stayed in the Bhurusrapali ashrama. Though, he was a householder he

temporarily adopted an ascetic lifestyle. From time to time, he went home to his village to see his wife. With the blessings of Bhima Bhoi he had a daughter whom he called Rohini. When she grew up and did not want to marry her father gave Rohini as a present to his guru Bhima Bhoi. (22)

The third woman associated with Bhima Bhoi was Annapurna who joined the asrama herself. Many people say that she was the maidservant of Lord Mahima and after his death, she joined Bhima Bhoi's ashrama. According to another story, she obeyed the order of Mahima Goswain who ordered her to leave Dhenkanal to get darsana of Bhima Bhoi. Once she had reached Bhurusrapali, she decided to stay with him and offer her service at Bhima Bhoi's feet. It was in the asrama of Khaliapali that the fourth woman was offered by Iswar Das of Rampela village. Iswar Das offered his daughter Saraswati to Bhima Bhoi.

Priyadarshi Bahinipati in her *Mahima Dharma its Mission, Problems and Perspectives* writes.

In Mahima Dharma there are two sects - *sanyasa* (ascetic) and *grhi* (householder). One can adhere to either of the order and live a pure and austere life through dedication, restraints, and devotion. Bhima Bhoi had attached great importance to *samarpana* i.e. complete surrender to the *guru param brahma* (Supreme) for all including a *grhi* sect follower so that fear, dilemma and confusion will not touch anyone (94)

Bhima Bhoi is widely regarded as a householder. But he was definitely not an ordinary householder who married and had children. He stayed in an asrama and had the status of a religious leader. Ishita Banerjee in *Religion, Law and Power* states:

He experimented with his life after settling down at Khaliapali. His intimate connection with popular trends of yogic Tantric meditation prevalent in eastern India – a connection which had been forgotten or suppressed within the Mahima Dharma tradition – probably actuated Bhima Bhoi to take to the life of a householder. (72).

In several places in *Stuti Chintamani*, Bhima justifies his marital status saying that the life of a householder in no way jeopardizes the position of a spiritual leader. He was even ostracized by the Mahima Samaj (community) at Joranda and also *sannyasis* were forbidden to accept *bhiksha* (alms) at his ashrama. In *Stuti Chintamani* 63/02 he writes:

Though I am a householder, I call myself a Guru.

(Trans.; Baumer and Beltz 243)

Again in 63/10 he writes:

I enjoy having a wife and son.

This was in my fate.

I enjoy the fruits of my past deeds.

Why do others interfere?

(Trans.; Baumer and Beltz 245)

Ishita Banerjee Dube in her *Religion, Law and Power* writes:

The mix of opposites that characterized Bhima Bhoi – his capacity to compose works of great literary and spiritual merit despite his low birth and a lack of formal education, and his success as a

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religious leader who transgressed celibacy and allowed women to become ascetics- confounded the middle-class critics and admirers (73)

Bhima Bhoi broke away from the conventional practices of the existing society by allowing women the freedom to join the monastic order. He urged women to break out of the limits of domestic life and sensual pleasure and to take up spiritual and religious activities. He advised women to walk on the path of Brahma and strongly sympathized with the suffering of the exploited women. At a time, even when his own monastery at Joranda did not permit entry of a woman to their *asrama*, Bhima vehemently opposed the prevailing customs and strived for equal participation of women in religion. Even in Mahima religion women were not allowed to become ascetics but Bhima revolted this fact and writes that the Mahima devotees can beg for food from any house, even from Christian households, but the plight of women was such that a woman was denied entry into the Mahima monastic order and further becomes an outcaste just by reciting the name of Mahima. Through his verse, he revolted against the prescriptions of his own order and initiated women into the Mahima fold. In *Stuti Chintamani* Boli 50/13 he says:

The men eat in any house.
And they become devotees of Mahima
But, for reciting the name of Mahima,
Why do your women lose this caste.

(Trans.; Baumer and Beltz 225)

In the nineteenth century Orissa, women were being treated as outcastes and their identity was non-existent. They were burning in the wild fire of social torment, cruelty, superstition and religious persecution being inflicted upon them. Bhima Bhoi's poetry had heralded the concern for the emancipation of women. His poetry ignited a new flame of revolutionary spirit among the women of the society. He felt that unless the unfulfilled spirits were freed from the persisting flames of social ostracization, there would be no development of human values, nor the establishment of a true religion. A 'true religion' is not the religion of men only but both men and women. Hence Bhima had sought for an equal and active participation of women not only in building an active society but also enhancing their spiritual life.

He always asserted that there is no difference between men and women and that both are creations and children of God. Bhima condemned the priests and preachers of his time for creating fissures between men and women. Being a true follower of the preaching's of Mahima Swami, he cannot differentiate and discriminate between the creations of God. Men and women are created by the same God and hence he sees all things as equal without any bias or prejudice. He doesn't regard women as inferior or lesser sex who should be confined in house only. He sees women as having great potential for love, compassion and pursuing a spiritual life of their own. In *Stuti Chintamani* 27 /13 he writes:

I, am ignorant poet, follow a
hidden path.

Because of your compassion
I see all things as equal, I cannot
discriminate.

Satyadhama is my witness.

(Trans.; Baumer and Beltz 169)

No social reformer or preacher had so severely called upon the society to initiate the reformation of society and emancipate women as Bhima Bhoi. Women are forever noble and worthy of salutation. If women are deprived of their rights, the world will be engulfed in darkness. Bhima Bhoi spread the message in his writings that both men and women are inseparable components of a society and both are creations of God. He declared that one who discriminates between male and female gets damned in hell. Both men and women are born out of one and same Brahma and every individual have their own identity and uniqueness. Both men and women have their own name, individuality and distinctiveness and hence it is an offence to differentiate and ascribe lower status to women. It is wrong to violate the natural rights of women. He writes in *Stuti Chintamani* 27/14 that:

Every creature of the three worlds
has a different name, its own identity,
Yet I know them all to have the same soul.
I make no distinction among them.

(Trans.; Baumer and Beltz 169)

Sitakanta Mahapatra in his *Bhima Bhoi* writes:

Bhima Bhoi speaks in the voice of a revolutionary who is intensely concerned with the redemption of society and the welfare of all. The revolt is not against any group or religious sect. It is primarily against the decay of moral values, personal honesty and in favour of a deep sense of ethical norms. (13)

Bhima Bhoi had witnessed tragedy, suffering and exploitation of women at various levels. His accusing finger is directed at the society and its leaders. He gets into intense emotional mood and accuses society for its degeneration. He goes to the extent of saying that it is only when women impart knowledge to men that an ideal world will be created. He makes a powerful and compelling statement when he writes in *Stuti Chintamani*, Boli 24/18 that:

Slander and Pride will be not strong,
all will be one in this hearts.
When the women impart knowledge to men,
the age of truth will return.

(Trans.; Baumer and Beltz 153)

He recognizes the importance of women in the society. Women are not objects that should be trampled upon and disregarded as a sexual object only. They possess immense knowledge and are not illiterate as the men comprehend them to be. The Age of Truth or *Satyayuga* will return only when men will listen and accept the knowledge imparted by women. It is only when men listen to women that they will give up their "slander and pride". The arrogance and vanity that they treasure in their heart will diminish as a woman fills up a man's heart with love, tenderness and sympathy for others. She has the capacity to change the violent behavior in a man and in saying so

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Bhima Bhoi comes closer to Emerson's romantic concept of women that they are naturally elegant, soft-hearted and benevolent. "Women are, by this and their social influence, the civilizers of mankind.... Man is the will, and Woman the sentiment". (Sacks 159)

Bhima Bhoi tasted success after the king of Sonapur, won over by his display of miraculous powers, granted him land at Khaliapali and aided the construction of his ashrama. His deification began. He performed miracles, cured diseases and gave children to childless women. It was here that Bhima married Annapurna, a Brahmin woman who bore him a son Kapileswar and a daughter Labanyabati. He writes in *Stuti Chintamani* 64/5, 6:

One who wants to have a wife,
despite being an ascetic is known as
fallen.....

by people of all three worlds,
and they count him among the dead.

We are under the control of none
except that of our Guru. On our heads
we never bear anyone else's
command.

We move only under the command of
our Guru.

(Trans.; Baumer and Beltz 253)

Bhima again rejects the tradition that a devotee cannot marry and lead a household life and at the same time follow a spiritual life. Those devotees who cohabit with women are labeled as 'fallen'. But Mahima dharma was a revolutionary and rebellious sect, discarding all the Brahminic principles. Hence setting himself as an example of a nonconformist protester he married and had a wife, led the life of a householder and also became a great spiritual leader. Everything happens at the command of the Lord and when the Lord commanded him to get married, he had to fulfill his order.

Ishita Banerji Dube is her book *Religion, Law and Power* writes:

Annapurna came to share the honors with Bhima Bhoi as Ma Annapurna symbolizing the equality granted to women by Bhima Bhoi in the path of meditation and salvation. During the *maghi purnima* (full moon in January-February) celebration at Khaliapali, Bhima Bhoi and Annapurna sat on a raised platform to give *darsana* to their followers. They offered prayers, services and gifts to the spiritual couple in a gesture of devotion and surrender. (103)

Bhima Bhoi didn't marry Annapurna to confine her to the chores of the house but gave her the status and honor to be worshipped as 'Maa'. Both of them being worshipped together by the devotees indicate the power, authority and influence she had in the *ashrama*. She was no ordinary woman but was called as *adimata* (goddess) by the devotees. She was identified as the goddess of grain and many called her Adi Annapurna.

Bhima Bhoi's plea to respect women in the society was not confined to mere rhetoric but he proved it in action too. By admitting women in Khaliapali ashram he raised the esteem of women

and emancipated them. By conferring the highest status to Maa Annapurna in his monastery, he proved that Mahima cult was set to break new ground. He held women as primary source of power and proclaimed that women were the supreme creation of God and should not be treated as mere sex objects. Women are much more than body. His purpose was to see a woman being treated reverentially as mother and daughter so that they could be free from discrimination, objectification and exploitation. He portrayed women as the symbol of purity. In *Stuti Chintamani* 93/10 he writes:

If one worships Mahima one must consider
all women as one's own mother.

Calling them 'Mother', one is free from
illusion and delusion.

(Trans.; Baumer and Beltz 271)

When one treats other women as his own mother he will not see them with lustful eyes. Men will not be sexually attracted to her and women in the society who have been victims of humiliation, torture and exploitation since ages, will have better standards of living in the society. Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women and that it is one of the crucial social mechanism by which women are foiled into a subordinate position compared with men. Men being physically stronger always subjugates woman and degrades her to the status of a mere object. But when a man considers other woman as mother, he will refrain from seeing her with a sense of sexual desire. Bhima Bhoi throughout his writings, preaches about uplifting the condition of women, revolting against all kinds of social evils inflicted on them and said that there is no difference as such between men and women. Frequently he has written about granting equal status to women in the society. He initiated or admitted men and women into his monastery without discrimination of caste, gender or status. In *Stuti Chintamani* 20/18 he writes:

I preach the initiation of equality

(Trans.; Baumer and Beltz 131)

Annapurna was elevated to the status of Ma Annapurna and she was worshipped along with Bhima Bhoi. Nayak in his *The Voice of Silence* writes: "Annapurna began playing a decisive role in the daily activities of the *asrama* soon after she began residing there . . . The *bhaktas* also offered *puja* to her . . . both of them were worshipped on an altar with 108 *kalasas* and a sacred flame at the Khaliapali *asrama*" . (105)

Annapurna and Bhima Bhoi together accepted the adoration and services of the devotees. Her *paduka* is still kept with those of Bhima Bhoi's and worshipped every evening before sunset .After the death of Bhima Bhoi the management of the *asrama* came into her hands. She was the head of Khaliapali *asrama*. Giving due respect to her divine power, devotees of Mahima Dharma got initiated and received Mahima *bana* from her. She also constructed the *samadhi* – *mandira* (memorial) of Bhima Bhoi at Kaliapali. "As a souvenir on the death of Annapurna, Bhima Bhoi scribe Hari Panda wrote a

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long poem entitled *Matru Biccheda* in which he praised the role of Annapurna." (Beltz 138) In the poem he has narrated the kindness and charity of Annapurna who could not bear his sorrow for a moment. The world had become a beautiful place because of her. From his writings it becomes evident the leadership role that Annapurna had taken up in the *asrama*.

It is because of Bhima Bhoi's trust in the power of women that Annapurna received such adoration and worship from the *bhaktas*. She is even portrayed as a leading lady of Mahima Dharma. Bhima Bhoi not only preached of women emancipation but had gone few steps ahead to practice it also. He admitted women into his *asrama* and made them aware of the immense ability that they possessed. He was a radical social reformer for the time that he belonged to, a revolutionary spearheading emancipation of women and a versatile genius who enlightened the hearts of large sections of Orissa's subaltern population.

The tradition of initiating women to Mahima Dharma continued in Bhima Bhoi's *asrama* in Khaliapali. After the death of Bhima Bhoi, Annapurna continued the tradition and after her demise, Labanyabati, Bhima and Annapurna's daughter conducted the affairs of the *asrama* as its chief. Annapurna and Labanyabati had inherited the extraordinary healing powers of Bhima Bhoi. Labanyabati took charge of the *asrama* at Khaliapali after her mother's death. Like Annapurna, she was an extraordinary woman who was highly talented and diversely knowledgeable. She possessed knowledge in medical sciences and wrote a book on Ayurveda titled *Lata Manjari*. The book carries an elaborate description of various medicinal plants written in Sanskrit. Johannes Beltz and Kedar Mishra write:

The hagiographic records of the life of Labanyabati reveal her as *ajanmabrahmachari* (a celibate all her life). Further it is believed that her body had the holy marks of a conch, the wheel, the *gada* and the lotus, the holy marks of Visnu. Thus she clearly represented the ascetic ideal. She never spoke much. When she did, she uttered the name Mahima Alekha, sang the *bhajan*s of Bhima and explained their significance to the devotees. She was very affectionate and attracted devotees to the *asrama*. She completed 54 years and was known in the area as *nari* (respected woman) (140)

The devotees of Bhima Bhoi worshipped Labanyabati as *adisakti* (primal energy). After Bhima Bhoi's death, women such as Annapurna and Labanyabati were treated as demi-goddess because they could perform miracles and heal people. It is because of Bhima's belief in women that they could find their voice in a male dominated voiceless society. He went against all Brahminical traditions and brought about an upsurge of rational consciousness in all spheres of life. He denounced the male-Brahmin supremacy and broke all established ideals, beliefs and notions by taking up the life of a householder despite being a guru. Not only was he moved by the suffering of the women, but he instilled in them a sense of confidence and dignity by inducting them in

his *asrama* and giving them the highest place of being worshipped and adored beside him. Bhima Bhoi was a symbol of truth, energy, equality and righteousness who was not only a great poet but a liberator of women from their sufferings. His relationship with Annapurna despite being a guru can be interpreted as a protest against the social sanctions. He democratized Mahima Dharma by allowing women as disciples and giving them vital roles to play in the functioning of the *asrama*.

Conclusion

Bhima Bhoi contested with the ascetic ideal promoted by the monastic order at the Joranda *asrama*. The monks in Joranda *asrama* believed that asceticism is generally attributed to men and not to women. Women are not allowed to take *sannyasa* as they are weak and their place is within the four walls of the house. But Bhima Bhoi always emphasized that men and women are equal and that women should never be looked down upon as weak. The monks in Joranda always looked down on the Khaliapali *asrama* and criticized Bhima for admitting women. They disregarded and underestimated Bhima Bhoi for his actions. The tension between Bhima Bhoi and Joranda resulted from the fact that Bhima Bhoi made his own rules and protested against the established set of norms in the society. He accepted women into his *asrama* irrespective of their caste backgrounds and initiated them into the new sect. This was an act of revolt because it was not a usual practice for a religious leader to break the prevailing rules. Hence Bhima Bhoi was declared a heretic by the *sannyasis* of Joranda *asrama* and he was violently criticized for his reformist attitude towards women. Bhima Bhoi was unshaken by the criticism and continued initiating women in his *asrama*. Despite the criticism that he faced, Bhima Bhoi commanded greater veneration from his followers and through his protest he sought to bring about a change in the society. He enjoyed the same authority and adoration that Mahima Swami was said to have commanded.

There was nothing more Bhima Bhoi wished for in life. He decided to leave the earth. He announced his departure in advance so as to prepare the *bhaktas* for it. His mortal remains were buried at Khaliapali. His Khatau (wooden sandals) started being worshipped. His life became a legend. (Dube 103)

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