

Bhima Bhoi: A Critique of His Writings and Preaching

Abstract

This article is the repertoire of the critical analysis of Bhima Bhoi's writings and preaching's. Numerous articles have been written on different aspects of Bhima Bhoi, thus making it difficult to write something new and unique on his writings. This article tries its best to present Bhoi's writings and preaching's in a very objective and down to earth manner. For this purpose, some works like Stuti Chintamani, Bhajan Mala, Astaka Bihari Gita have been taken for literary analysis. In these works, Bhoi has not only cried foul over the social blind beliefs and taboos but also has denigrated 'untouchability', the major barrier of equality and harmony in the society. Apart from that Bhoi has propagated a new religion and a concept of God to remove the misconception of God of common man which led them to their victimization in the society directly and indirectly.

Keywords: Bhajanas, Mahima Dharma, Marginalization, Shudra, Vedas, Protest, Discrimination, Preaching, Idol worship, Void.

Introduction

The Nineteenth Century Orissa experienced the appalling form of Hindu rigid customs and conventions and various beliefs and superstitions whether right or wrong, religious or irreligious were followed by the people and this primarily was because education and literacy had not reached the masses and the naïve people believed in every stories that their forefathers told them. This also led to many gruesome practices and horrid customs of human sacrifice, sati and infanticide. The caste prejudice, low status of women, child marriage, female infanticide and austere belief in religion were some of the phenomena of Orissa in the Nineteenth Century. It was also a period when the East India Company made its advent in 1803 and marked a new era in the history of Orissa. It was after the second Maratha War that the British occupied Orissa in 1803. The British occupation took place when Orissa was reeling under backwardness in all spheres as the Maratha rule was only interested in revenue collection neglecting all developmental activities. Hence the apathetic attitude of the Marathas resulted in the economic and social backwardness in Orissa. The Nineteenth Century Oriya Society presented a complex picture of dismay caught in a vicious web created by religious superstitions and social obstructions. Hinduism had become an amalgamation of magic, animism and superstition. As Orissa was isolated from the rest of India, growth and development was completely absent. The oppression and exploitation of the Maratha rule had ruined the people economically and lack of education and knowledge had stunted any human resource development. Even the British Administration did not take any immediate measures for two reasons. First, like Maratha, they were also interested in revenue collection and secondly, they feared resistance and rebellion that resulted out of displeasure and antagonism of the natives. Further, the British through several publications criticized the Jagannath cult that had been considered for centuries, the very base of Oriya identity. This invoked a sharp reaction from the conservative people of Orissa and a certain amount of insecurity and uncertainty made the people deepen and reinforce their traditional norms of caste hierarchy with a new fervor. This further escalated when Hunter in *A Statistical Account of Bengal* condemned the Oriyas as "Priest race, kept in subjection by the Brahmins and subject to all paralyzing influences of religious superstition and caste prejudice. No where do the caste rules exercise such an influence." (61) He further stated, "The temple of Jagannath in which every creed obtained an asylum and in which every class and sect can find its God now closes its doors to its low-caste population." (62)

Review of Literature

Tandra Patnaik in her book *God as Sunya: The Philosophy of Mahima Dharma and Bhima Bhoi* (2016) discusses primarily the

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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 emphasises on the “*Sunya*” tradition of the Mahima followers and how this new religion had given hope and comfort to the dejected and depressed people of Orissa reeling under the oppression and tyranny of the Brahmins and high-castes. She also explores the contribution of Bhima Bhoi towards the spreading of Mahima Dharma and holds him as the vanguard of Mahima literature. It was through Bhima’s voluminous writings that this new religion spread quickly amongst the people.

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.

Popular Religion and Ascetic Practices: New Studies on Mahima Dharma (2008) edited by Ishita Banerjee Dube and Johannes Beltz is a collection of articles by Indian and German scholars on Mahima Dharma of Odisha. It discusses the development and chronology of the new Dharma, historical research on its founder and textual analyses and offer of interpretations on this religion. The book also constitutes various analysis of the life and works of the revolutionary poet, Bhima Bhoi. Sanjeeb Kumar Nayak in his article “ A Note On the Mystic Poetry of Bhima Bhoi” writes: “ Bhima Bhoi was a radical visionary who went back to the sources of the traditions and adapted their resources to his own time and condition. In this sense, he can be called a ‘revolutionary classicist’ who broke free from the rigid structures of orthodoxy and yet remained loyal to its original foundation”.(104)

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 his utmost to reform Indian society. In the age of rigid caste system and idol worship, he questioned the hierarchical system, the Kings, the Brahmins, the caste system and the role of women within Oriya society. Bhima Bhoi is often depicted as the first social revolutionary of modern Orissa who fought against the obscurantist social traditions and hence is considered as the champion for the cause of humanism.

With the caste system giving utmost superiority and power to the Brahmins, this created new challenges for the people belonging to the lower strata of the society. The Kings and Brahmins made an unholy nexus to exclude the downtrodden and poor from the divine scheme of ‘dharma’. The Jagannath Dharma signified the religion of both high and low and this nexus was quite opposed to the very spirit of Jagannath Dharma. But due to the practices of the Kings, Zamindars and Brahmins, there was a reversal in the inclusion of the low caste

people into the fold of the Dharma. This created an enormous amount of suffering, frustration and agony in the lower strata society. Ishita Banerjee Dube in her article “Issue of Faith, Enactment of Contest : The Founding of Mahima Dharma in Nineteenth Century Orissa” rightly states :

“The close association with royalty coupled with the introduction of caste discrimination in practices of the temple at Puri made Jagannath appear in the nineteenth century as an exclusive and distant Lord, a monopoly of Brahmins and rulers. He had moved away far from his initial devotees and had come to be identified with those who wielded power and authority.” (158)

In addition to the strict caste rules, the Great Famine of 1886 unleashed an unparalleled disaster on the downtrodden and helpless people. The strict rules of the orthodox caste system made a person outcast if he took help or food from the relief centre offered by Colonial Administration. They were ostracized from the society. Hence a sense of resentment was already brewing in the minds of these people. All such factors created a fertile ground for a socio cultural rebellion and Mahima Dharma appeared just on time to give hope and solace to the oppressed class.

Mahima Dharma emerged and gained prominence when Orissa was undergoing a devastating Famine. The prevailing condition of the time helped in spreading of the new Dharma which decried idol worship and discarded the position of Brahmins as the mediator between God and Man. Not only did Mahima Dharma question social hierarchy but it brought the Creator of the Universe within the reach of all poor people through pure devotion and worship. Chittaranjan Das, the famous scholar on ‘Sant’ literature aptly states in *A Glimpse into Odiya Literature* that :

“Mahima Dharma was the last protest of the saints against the established Hindu religion. It was not a Buddhist movement, neither had it to do anything with the Vaisnava way of worship. It did not believe as a religion in getting the sanction of the King to be able to survive and flourish and it proclaimed an open revolt against the externalist obsession in religion. It flourished out of the courts, out of the influence of the King’s mace, flouted the superiority of the Brahmins and registered most of the followers from the lowliest and the downtrodden in society. It was an effort to give to those who stood at the lowest in a status infested society, a real sense of human dignity and sought to raise them up as equals and devotees.” (157)

A visionary of truth and a rebel against injustice, oppression and treachery prevailing in the society, Bhima Bhoi was a humanist of high order subscribing significantly to the *Advaita* (One) view of Vedanta on one hand and the *Madhyamika Sunyaveda* (Void) on the other. He was the foremost poet of Mahima Dharma who enriched Oriya literature with his numerous composition and devotional songs. As C. R. Das writes : “Bhima Bhoi is the precious gift of Mahima Dharma to Oriya Literature and he should also be claimed as the most precious gift of Orissa and Oriya Literature to the legacy that is India.” (158).

His role was important for the reason that Mahima Swami had no written works and what is left of Mahima Dharma were the Bhajans and songs of Bhima Bhoi that were treated as holy scriptures of Mahima Dharma. Bhima Bhoi chose poetry as his medium of preaching his religion and his verses were imbued with radical ideas of the situation of his time. He preached to the ordinary, illiterate men and women and hence his poetic diction is largely drawn from nature and tradition. Even though his language was ordinary and colloquial, yet it was highly suggestive and emotive. Bhima Bhoi's poetical works comprising of *Stuti Chintamani*, *Brahma Nirupana Gita*, *Nirbedha Sadhana*, *Srutinisedha Gita*, *Adi Anta Gita*, *Bhajanmala*, *Cautisa Madhuchakra*, *Padmakalpa*, *Brahma Calak Gita* and *Manusabha Mandal* elaborate the philosophy and practices of Mahima Dharma and also his own quest for Brahma whom he calls Alekha.

Mahima Dharma conceives God as *Sunya* and *Sunya* is perhaps the most frequently used term in the works of Bhima Bhoi. As Anncharlott Eschmann writes in her article "Mahima Dharma : An Autochthonous Hindu Reform Movement" :

"Mahima Dharma takes of the Buddhist concept of 'emptiness' (*Sunya*) and identifies it with the Hindu conception of *Param Brahma* and *Isvara Purusa*. *Sunya Param Brahma* is characterized more precisely with the concepts *alekha* (indescribable), *nirguna* (without attributes), *nirakara* (formless), *anadi* (eternal), *niranjana* (pure) and *mahima* (glory) all of which already appear in medieval oriya literature for describing *Sunya Brahma* or as synonym to Him" (389)

The term '*Sunya*' is used by Bhima Bhoi with much more wider implications than any other system of thoughts. God is the embodiment of *Sunya* who roams in *Sunya*, his abode is *Sunya* (*Sunya Mandira*) and he resides in *Sunya* (*Sunyavasi*). He further claims *Sunya* to be the womb from which creation has taken place. In *Bhajanmala*, he establishes this through his verses :

He roams in the Sunya, his footsteps
You fathom within your heart
Limitless is the ocean called Mahima
He has neither form nor outline
The Sunya bodied has appeared in
the Sunya
He has neither form nor a contour.
Whose abode is the temple of Sunya.

(Trans: Tandra Patnaik,70-71)

He further states in *Bhajanmala Boli 22*, Pada-1/ 2:

O Purusa, you are without color or
form and beyond the Void.
You have no name, unnameable
you are, indescribable and unseen.
In which form shall I recognize you,
you whose greatness is endless ?
Unspeakable and beyond sound,
there is no trace of Veda.
Even I, as a poet, have no courage
to describe you.

(Trans: Bettina Baumer and Johannes Beltz, 321)

Tandra Patnaik in her *God as Sunya* states :

"According to the Mahima Dharma, the best way to address this Reality Supreme is possible only through negative epithets such as unnameable (*anamika*), formless (*arupa*) without any identifying mark (*avarna*), imperceptible (*adrsya*), non-describable (*avyakta*), non-qualifiable (*nirguna*), taintless (*niranjan*), beginningless (*anadi*), beyond thought or mind (*amana*) *Sunya Brahma* : yet He is the *Prabhu Parama Purusa* (the Highest Being)". (77) Bhima Bhoi, repeatedly discredited idol worship in his verses as God has no form, shape, figure and structure. So the Mahima followers dismissed and abandoned all that is accepted as sacred and sanctified in orthodox Hindu tradition. He condemned the outward cleanliness, religiosity, and rituals and endeavoured to infuse in people, love and compassion for each other, inner cleansing of the heart ,eternal peace, friendship and mental happiness. In the works of Bhima Bhoi , we see the complete fructification of the spirit of non-conformity and rebellion. He writes :

"One who realizes *Sunya Brahma* through true knowledge discards Gods and Goddess, all the idols along with the tantra, mantra and Vedas." (*Bhajanmala Boli 6*, Pada-1, Trans: Tandra Patnaik, 84)

In the name of Vedic tradition, the society has been stratified from high to low and this tradition with intermittent challenges continues today. The Dharmashastra dominated the nineteenth century period and it was strictly adhered to, as the Sastras were the only available guide for life of a Hindu devotee. The stratification in the Vedas gave rise to a class-based hierarchical society giving Brahmins uncontested power. What was just hinted at in the *Purusasukta* of *Rig Veda* about the birth of different classes of people from different limbs of *Purusa* became an unbreakable and impassable theory of social hierarchy famously known as Varna-Dharma. It is an irony that many people do not know the contents of the Vedas but are blind adherents of caste distinctions. This division placed the Brahmins, Kshetriys, Vaisya and Sudra in hierarchy with Sudras to serve the three higher classes. Hence the Sudras were regarded as the children of lesser God with few social and cultural rights. The untouchables were the fifth group who were added to this. They were considered unworthy and fall outside the caste system. The Sudras are once-born as opposed to the three higher castes who are twice born – biologically and culturally. "The second birth is metaphorical and it may be called initiation in the process of culturalisation that is done during their studentship under the Guru (Teacher). The Sudra on the other hand, is not allowed to undergo such ceremonies and therefore he is born only once." (*God in Sunya*, 121) That is why a Sudra or an untouchable was forbidden to read Vedas as they are the lowliest in the social ladder and by nature are impure. Bhima Bhoi has criticized the Vedas for bringing about such a caste difference and in the name of Dharma, discrimination and supremacy of the higher caste has prevailed. He was not an ordinary social reformer but a practical philosopher who backs his protest against discrimination by metaphysics. God is one and unique

and is present everywhere, in everyone and hence all individuals are divine. So there is no scope for discrimination from man and man. He has questioned the very existence of such a division into caste. He writes in *Bhajanmala* Boli 5/3,5 :

“The Vedas Rg, Sama, Yajur, Atharva,
and the seed *mantras hrim, klim and slim*
Roam in all directions of the sky. Sad are
they for not having found Brahman.”

(Trans: Bettina Baumer and Johannes Beltz, 287)

Mahima literature spoke about caste discrimination and suggested people to abandon idol worship encouraging hope, equality, peace and awareness amongst the oppressed classes. He preached about worshipping ‘*Nirguna Brahma*’ by dissociating himself and rejecting the philosophy and ideals of scriptural idol worship. Hence Bhima Bhoi through his poems attracted the dejected and depressed people and reached to those who were far from citizenship of life. He directed the people to follow the path of truth and justice. Through his writing, he had given direction and power to the movement of Mahima Swami and was instrumental in the social and religious upliftment of the people. He held in contempt the prevalent religious rituals of the high caste who had secluded and isolated the low caste in name of Dharma and hence criticized these rituals in his writings. There is only one God, “*Param Brahma*” to whom man should surrender. Hence in *Brahma Nirupana Gita* Chapter 1/6,8,9 he writes :

“Bad time has come now when truth
and religion has sunken,
so tell me how the people will get
over their difficulties.
Now, there is no more virtue in the
world,
As falsehood and sins have made
void.
For the deliverance of the soul, the
eternal divine soul has appeared in
this world,
but no body know it.”

(Trans : Priyadarshi Bahinipati ,77)

Bhima Bhoi was a faithful devotee who was committed in spreading the message of Mahima. Each word in his writing echoes power, energy, courage, commitment, bravery and strength of a revolutionary. His self confidence and fearlessness is reflected in his writings. He did not weep silently by witnessing the moral degradation of the society, discrimination and humiliation of the weak and oppressed but he took to challenging the atrocious behavior through his words and action. When the society was steeped in inequality brought by caste system, Bhima was preaching about fairness and non-discrimination and subsequently had incurred the wrath of the high caste people. He writes in *Stuti Chintamani*, 20/18 :

“I preach the initiation of equality
and so they call us dogs.”

(Trans: Bettina Baumer and Johannes Beltz, 131)

He is also abused, ill-treated and
called names for propagating the
belief of Mahima Dharma :

“People abuse me, they call me a
Christian”

(*Stuti Chintamani*, 20/02, Trans: Bettina Baumer and Johannes Beltz, 125)

Mukti Laxhi Mangharam in his article
“Radical Religious Poetry in Colonial Orissa” writes:

Bhima Bhoi was the saint poet of Mahima Dharma, literally the glorious Dharma, which advocated devotion to an all-pervasive formless absolute, equally accessible to all, as the way to salvation. This seemingly simple message rendered the worship of idols (*murtipuja*) redundant, including that of Jagannath, the central deity of Hinduism in Orissa and the state deity for centuries, questioned the hierarchies of caste and kinship (*jati-gata bibheda*) and the role of the brahmins as mediators between gods and men. Therefore, Bhima rejected the ritual use of *tulsi* (holy basil) , a high symbol of sanskrit and brahmanic Hindu identity, and in a radical reversal of social conventions refused to accept food from brahmins. (82)

Bhima Bhoi was frequently accused as a Christian as he opposed idol worship, priesthood and the caste system just as the Christian Missionaries had denounced these practices. He also disowned the superiority of Jagannath who was regarded as the God of Universe and was the symbol of Odia identity. Further, he held Jagannath to be the disciple of Alekha Mahima. Bhima Bhoi was of the opinion that Lord Jagannath resided in the grand temple but as a real master of the universe he should not confine himself to the temple only. But now, Lord Jagannath has made himself inaccessible to the low caste people and created discrimination between high and low. But a true believer of Jagannath will not worship the idol placed in the temple as Jagannath sees everyone in equal eyes. He does not differentiate between high and low or rich and poor but it is the society that has discriminated and made Lord Jagannath exclusively the God of the rich. Hence he says:

Jagannatha is within your heart
You unnecessarily worship his idol.
His idol is made after all, with dry wood
Can the worship of such an idol take
you to Vaikuntha?

(*Srutinshedha Gita* 2,10. Trans: Tandra Patnaik, 131)

Bhima Bhoi on seeing the world immersed in sorrowful sufferings caused by the caste system wanted to demolish and destroy the existing world and build a new world of equality, liberty and fraternity. But he is utterly dismayed as he is unable to do so as Mahima Swami has not yet instructed and guided him to dismantle this world. This shows the utmost pain that he shares with the persecuted that to save them from their misery, he can go to any length. At the same time, the poet is aware of his own power of dismantling the world and at the same time is also aware of his limitations as a human being. He accepts the absolute authority of the Lord without whose command a leaf even cannot shake. He writes in *Stuti Chintamani* Boli 26/17:

In the single day, nay within a moment I
could overturn the world,

But I bite my lips what can I do ? My
blessed Guru has not ordered me so.

(Trans: Bettina Baumer and Johannes Beltz, 161)
Further, Bhima Bhoi does not find any reason and rationale behind the practice of people going on pilgrimages. He firmly believes that God does not reside in a particular place but the human body is itself the seat of God. One needs to search his soul and mind to find God and not undertake long pilgrimages and visit temples. God is not served by religious offerings and rites but one should serve God's creation as He himself is manifested in every being. So he says in *Stuti Chintamani* Boli 92:

"Without knowing the essence of God
You roam all around
For the sake of tirtha and vrata.
If you think deeply,
Then you can see Brahman,
Wherever you want Him.

(Trans : Tandra Patnaik , 133)

The Hindu Vedas and Shastras dictate that every Hindu must visit sacred temples to gain divine blessings from God and hence following the instructions, they visit the holy temples to show their benediction towards the Lord. This stood in sharp contrast to the practices of the followers of Mahima Dharma who believed in *Sarana Darshan* that is evening and morning prayers. They opposed the strenuous pilgrimages to innumerable temples to show their faith and hope for salvation. Mahima devotees did not have to undertake pilgrimages to show their devotion. As Priyadarshi Bahinipati in *The Mahima Dharma : Its Mission, Problems and Perspectives* states : "Bhima Bhoi has dealt with the irregularities, lawlessness and corruption that were prevalent in different shrines of India."(88) . Hence in *Stuti Chintamani* Boli 95/3,4,5,6 he writes:

Dharma disappeared from all holy places
like Shri Purushottama and Kapilasa.
All places of pilgrimages have been
spoiled and no where is Brahman to be
found.
Dharma disappeared from the places of
pilgrimage, from Ganga and Gaya, Kasi
and Prayaga,
Even from Ramnatha Svetabandha,
nowhere is there any truth.
The holy places like Godavari and
Gaumati, like Vrindavana and Dvarika and
Haridwara,
All have become fruitless. The stream of
Dharma has gone dry.
Holy places like Mansarovar, like
Badrinatha, Vaitarani and Yamuna,
Even Saraswati and the fourth sacred
place, all have been ruined.

(Trans: Bettina Baumer and Johannes Beltz, 275)

In this connection Mukti Lakhi Mangharam writes: "He abandoned ritual, idol worship, pilgrimages and the mode of the symbolic for intense cognitive introspection and meditation that articulated a radical politics of rational social equality. Bhima defiantly declared his rejection of idol worship. His poetry

highlights the revolutionary nature of such ideas by drawing attention to the opposition he faced. (90)

Bhima Bhoi took up the task of removing disparity and differentiation that had stigmatized and marginalised the society and wanted to infuse a sense of hope, faith and aspiration amidst the people. In order to achieve peace, progress and stability, there should be non-discrimination and justness in the society. He sought to emancipate and liberate the subdued and victimized and in the process he wholeheartedly and delightfully endured misery and sorrow. He further believed that men will come together irrespective of their caste at the time of distress or calamity. He had not lost hope in the community-living and fellow-feeling among all individuals. All restrictions of caste will disappear in the face of any disaster. He writes in *Stuti Chintamani* Boli 24/13:

"The survivors will support each
other, depending on each other,
They will eat in common, gathering
together, becoming of one soul.

(Trans: Bettina Baumer and Johannes Beltz, 151)

Bhima Bhoi's concern for the entire humanity which is held as the essence of Mahima Cult, can be deduced from the greatly admired lines he composed in *Stuti Chintamani* Boli 27/7 :

"Endless are the agonies and
sorrows of the living, who can bear
to be witness ?
Condemn my life to hell, but let the
world be uplifted."

(Trans: Bettina Baumer and Johannes Beltz , 167)

The poet was prepared to condemn his soul to hell if it could save humanity. Such was the greatness of the poet. He wished humanity to be free from the ordeals of eternal suffering . S. C. Panigrahi in his *Bhima Bhoi and Mahima Concept of Salvation* writes:

"Bhima Bhoi's notion of salvation is thought in terms of liberation from degenerate, exploitative socio-religious system and establishment of the humanity on the ideals of universal love and co-existence. He does not obviously acknowledge a hiatus between theory and practice. His vision of unity of all existence entails life of action and a life of love and let live." (68-69). Bhima Bhoi's uniqueness lies in his charismatic personality of a poet, a protestant crusader, a philosopher, a preacher of equalitarianism and a devoted worshipper of Mahima. " He was an avant garde who paved the path for renaissance and the most conspicuous is the fact that he started it from below encompassing the lowly, distressed, oppressed, deserted fellow men and women." (*The Mahima: Its Mission*, 109) He raised the standard of the downtrodden, the powerless and the disadvantaged and brought them closer to spiritual devotion who otherwise were far removed and disconnected because of the exclusiveness of the Hindu god. Through his verses, he waged an unending war against the supposed custodians of the religion. Bhima Bhoi and the new Dharma gave consolation and hope to the tormented souls who badly needed a social and religious anchor to guide them . He

discredited the established social values and also excluded from its fold the Kings, the Brahmins and the high class people thereby becoming the religion of revolution rather than compromise.

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