



Research Paper

Mahimā Dharma: the Path to true Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of Mahimā Dharama, a religious tradition of Odisha, is centre around the concept of God as Śūnya-Bhama and Eka Advaita Prabhu Parama Brhama. Mahima Dharama, though very much a part of the Indian religio-philosophical tradition, primarily concerned with the condemnation of all religious customs set by the rich and upper-class society generally, the meaningless rites, the underprivileged castes in a caste-based Hindu society as a social reform and protest against the dominance of Brahmanism. The main focus of the paper is to delineate the genesis of Mahimā Dharma is not rooted in a social theory but an alternative metaphysical scheme that offered to a large section of people the path to true spirituality. Hence, it gives a new form of life that is very in consonance with the general structure of their metaphysics also.

KEYWORDS: Mahimā dharma, śūnya Brahman, alekha, bhakti, anāma, ṅiskāma.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mahima Dharma is an ascetic religion of Orissa, India, showing a strong diversity in its regional configurations. Mahima Dharma may be said to be the last representative of Post-Classical Bhakti Movement that came into prominence in Odisha sometimes in 1950s. Mahima Dharma founded the new faith as *Mahima Svami*, the incarnation of the indescribable Absolute. This process of the making of the *Svami* is encoded in varied testimonies. Second, it discusses the teachings of *Mahima Svami* and the practices of Mahima Dharma in the context of nineteenth-century Orissa to focus on the elements of challenge to dominant Hinduism embedded in the sect and the means of dignity, solace and new social space it provided to its primarily low-caste and tribal members. Mahimā Dharma the main protagonists of the religion, the ascetics (*babās*), as non-Brahmin priests, who have incorporated *shakti*, the power of the local Goddesses into their disciplined bodies and thus have transformed the feminine element of the Hindu belief into the belief of the indescribable and abstract God 'Alekha Mahima Dharma' is seen as a micro structure of popular asceticism and recent religious reforms in India which integrates as well as non-Brahmin priesthood as the belief in Goddesses on a local level. Finally, it explores how a crisis within the sect after the death of the founder and a particular understanding of the faith by a section of its followers led them to attack the Jagannāth temple at Puri on 1 March 1881. A handful of Mahimā Dharmis desecrated the sanctity of the temple and sought to destroy the manifest form of Jagannāth, a deity whose status as Lord of the Universe rested on the inextricable links between religion and politics, ritual and power.

Mahimā Svāmi

Mahimā Svāmi appeared in the Oriya newspaper *Utkal Deepika* on 1st June 1867. A new faith was spreading in the princely states bordering Cuttack. It had been founded by a *phalahāri sanyās* (an ascetic who survived on fruits). He lived on Kapilas hill in Dhenkanal, Odisha, India. The ascetic had initially subsisted on fruits, moved on to milk, and finally lived only on water. He worshipped Siva. One day, on the directions of *śūnya* (the great void), he cropped his matted locks and gave up his vocation as a mere renouncer. He began wearing the bark of a tree and spread a *dharma* which disregarded caste distinctions, forbade idol worship and rituals -- for example, *śraddhā* (death rites and ceremonies) - and advocated a belief in one *īśvara* (god). The *sanyāsi* was described as *atiniṛlobh* (completely free of greed) and earnest in his efforts to feed people at a time of scarcity. He constructed large temporary houses where he fed forty to fifty thousand people. He then burnt

these houses and moved on at will. The ascetic commanded great respect. The brief report in the Oriya paper had set out the bare details about the *sanyāsi* and his *dharma*. Clearly we need to know more about this enigma.

The main exponent of Mahimā Dharma is the celebrated poet-metaphysician BhimaBhoi. He is a poet of eminence, a humanist of high order an abstruse metaphysician subscribing significantly to the Advaita view of Vedānta on the one hand and to the *Mādhyamika Sunyavāda* on the other. He is the pioneer of this spectacular religious movement. Mahimā, which is noted for its deviation from the traditional *Brahminicāl* view of religion propounded and propagated by its diehard conservatives. BhimaBhoi is a creative genius par excellence. His unique creativity is reflected in different spheres of his literary works. Mahimā cult is predominantly a socio-religious system. Unlike other sects and cults Mahimā Dharma is confined to the observances of practices and prohibitions rather it aims at bringing value-transformation in the collective body of the society. It is an attempt to reform the traditional religions of their irreligious components. The writings of BhimaBhoi which are taken to be the available authentic source for the study of Mahimā system, do not contain the subtleties of regular philosophy. His writings were meant for the common man. A philosophic probe into the metaphysics of Mahimā cannot ignore the religio-philosophic tradition against which BhimaBhoi wrote and propagated the system. One finds a distinct echo of the *advaita* Vedanta, the *sunyavāda* of Buddhism and that of writings of *Panchasakhā* in his writings. The concepts like *Alekha*, *Mahimā*, *Puruṣa Brahaman*, *Sunya* are the key metaphysical notions. Hence it is necessary to lay bare the logical structure of these concepts. The holy phrase '*Mahimā Alekha*' which is accorded as the status of mantra in the system contains the essence of the system. Mahimā and Alekha are the denotative and connotative aspects of one and the same reality. It is significant to note that the terms 'Mahima' and 'Brahma' are synonymously used although the Mahima literature. The ultimate reality is addressed as *MahimāAlekha* is significant of the nature of *MahimāAlekha* literally means something, which does not have a fixed determinate form.

The concept of infinity takes one to the concept of sunya. Here sunya does not mere void. In one sense sunya means that the ultimate reality is non-categorical. It refers to the inadequacy of language in relation to the Brahma. Sunya also has an ontological sense in Mahimā Metaphysics. It is the connotative of ultimate state, which transcends everything. It is the ultimate end and the beginning of everything. There cannot be anything which is beyond it or greater than it.

Sunya mahāsunya bolitahakti kahi
Tanka uparaku aau badanāhin kehi (Brhmanirupanagita, III, 30.)

In consonance with the Indian tradition Bhima Bhoi accepts the essential tenets of the doctrine of karma that 'as you sow so shall you reap'. In other words the virtuous is rewarded and the sinner punished. The determinate relation between action and reaction is irrevocable.

Pāpa karithile pāpaku bhunjiba
Punya thile punya bhoga
Karme jahathiba grahirjya hoiba
Apanaarjita phala. (Brhmanirupanagita, 32)

The law of karma purports to assume strict determinism with regard to human actions and their consequences. As there is no caprice or arbitrariness in the functioning of the course of nature, there is no deviation in the action-reaction uniformity. If action is to be done and performance of action leads to bondage, how to understand the view that action is a means for liberation? Here BhimaBhoi brings in the concept of 'niskama' to resolve the paradox. According to him an action is done in a detached manner does not bind the individual because the agent gives up the sense of doership. Thus it is by suspending the sense of doership the one can exercise complete non-attachment for the consequence since the action is not one's own. In the metaphysical framework of BhimaBhoi, Mahima is the transcendental subjectivity that is the ultimate agent of all actions and as the nature of ultimate reality is *niskama*, the way to attain it is naturally *niskama*.

Niskama brahmaku jebe asrakara
Apana niskamahua (Stutichintamani. 55.)

BhimaBhoi's *niškāma* not only elucidates how an action is to be performed so that actions cease to have their binding influence but also speaks in detail the guidelines as to what one must do. BhimaBhoi does not ask anyone to give up his karma or profession as one has to act being bound by his own nature. Here one is reminded of the concept of *svadharmā* as enunciated in the Gita. BhimaBhoi says:

Tāhāra vrtti se narakhiba jebe
Kekariba sehu karma,
Mukhe jebe guru nāma japuthiba
Uddhāra karibe brahma (stutichintamani, 91.)

It is *svadharma*, which determines one's station in life. Society is a functional organisation and all functions, which are essential for the development of society, should be regarded as socially equal. Among the diverse functions that a society requires one has to engage himself in duties that are appropriate to him.

*Sarva karmare lagithaa pachhe brahma kama dhari chitte
Guru charane visvasa rakhile tarinejibe satya. 6. Stutichintamani, 90.*

*Mochi hoi charma katuthau pachhe namare asritaheu,
Taharavrtti se kemante chhadiba rojagara karuthau 7. (Stutichintamani, 91.)*

BhimaBhoi clearly states that jnana is not possible without the grace of God. Jnana is the gift of God, which cannot be attained by scriptures, so BhimaBhoi exhorts the aspirant to the path of knowledge, to pray to God for fulfilling his aspirations. The mind cannot become pure and firm unless one gets the grace of the almighty. So the jnani sees himself in everyone and everyone in himself. This results in steady expansion of mind and heart, which leads to love for all because everything is seen as the veritable manifestation of the lord.

*Sakalabhutareeka, ekaatmaprayadekhe...
Samastanku bole mora, muhinataitumbhara. 7. (Bhjanamala, II, 120.)*

The type of bhakti recommended by BhimaBhoi is *niskama bhakti* or *alekha bhakti*. It is not easy to attain steadfastness in Brahman because this requires absolute surrender to Lord. *Alekha bhakti* requires that there must be complete surrender of the aspirant. This is possible when the aspirant realizes that God is omnipotent, all merciful and he cannot get perfection either by himself or with the help of some other. He takes refuge with unshakable faith in the Lord for attaining his goal. He discards the idea of 'I' and 'mine' and dedicates himself heart and soul to the eternal service of the Lord.

*Samarpi panda paranadarasuttabittadhana
Dhari mate undasinaniskamamana re hi
Samarpi deli pailisarva
Bujhana bujhasvamigurudeva. (Bhjanamala, II, 120.)*

The bhakti marga aims to realise the infinite as object of consciousness and thus the duality between the *sevyā* (the Lord) and the *sevaka* (the devotee), that is to say, the duality between the object (*ananda*) and the subject experiencing the *ananda* remains final. The bhakta takes every external object as manifestation of the infinite. At the highest state of bhakti nothing but the absolute shines in its pristine consciousness. The Lord, or the sole-object of the devotees assures his devotees that he is constantly attached to his devotees Lord himself says that it is very rare to get a real devotee. A real devotee is part and parcel of the Lord and therefore Lord himself is infatuated by:

*Dekhi ta niskama bhakti
Ambhenachhadutarakati.
Emanarabhave he Govinda
Ambhebhakatajadabandha.
Jahabanchhiletahapai
Lodilebhakatanamilai.
Bhakataamarapranahita
Tenu ta bhavare mohita. (Bhjanamala, III, 173.)*

This dissolves the dichotomy between *sakama bhakti* and *niskama bhakti*. Similar views are expressed in the Gita.

Bhima Bhoi was trying to champion the cause of Humanism. Humanism as an articulated system of thought has been enunciated by different schools of thought with their respective vision of man, God and the Universe. Despite the differences in details of their exposition, humanists by and large agree with regard to the nature of man is free, dignified and is the ultimate end and that the non-human existents, i.e., animals and plants are the means to have an instrumental value. They have an existential value in so far as they sub-serve the interest of man. But the spiritual humanism of Bhima Bhoi does not treat man as an end in relation to non-humans who are means. The Vedantic vision of unity made him think beyond the human species and embrace the non-humans in the sweep. He prays the *alekha* not only to save the human species but also the animals, birds, insects who are none other than one kindered selves and the Lord Himself.

*Rakhyanaba kandamahi anadi alekha
Raksyakara swami naraloka
Kita patangajulapoka
Saranasambhaliraksa e jantujibaku. (Bhjanamala I, 17.)*

His deep agony finds classic expression when he prays God that he is no more able to withstand the suffering of beings around him. He says that he is prepared to court hell in lieu of the upliftment of all.

*Pranika arata dukha apramita
Dekhudekhukeba sahu
Mojivanpachhe narke padithau
Jagatauddhara heu. (Stutichintamani 27.)*

Spirituality as a journey from Morality to Divinity

Mahima Dharma is not a dharma in the ordinary sense of the term. In fact, though in modern India we hold the words dharma and religion as synonymous dharma in a term with much wider connotation. Dharma, though has several meanings and definitions, the predominantly admitted meaning has unique social orientation that totality is lacking in the word religion. The most popular definition of the term are- dhrayati it dharma- that which holds the society/mankind together is dharma. The definition indirectly refers to the human virtues like truth, non-violence, self-control, etc. that makes the human society a harmonious whole. So these virtues are also called dharma (for example, ahimsa parma dharma). Again, dharma also has been defined as dharanad dharma uccyate-that lifts to society or mankind from degeneration is dharma. Thus when we are using the word dharma in case of Mahima system of belief we must keep in mind that it is one of the very few systems of belief in the post-pannic phase that sticks to the spirit of the dharma in the true sense of the term. Here there is no promise of heaven, no idol to be propitiated, no rituals to make man worthy for the mukti. Thus Mahima dharma in its tenet and spirit is almost unparalleled in the history of Indian spiritualism. The only parallel may be Buddhism.

In Brahma Nirupana Gita, Bhima Bhoi attempts to define the nature and qualities of Brahman. This is an attempt particularly in the 4th canto. The description is through a series of binary oppositions or pairs of contradictions arising out of situations, qualities and objects. Some of these contradictions are:

He is the discipline and He is the guru. He is the darkness and He is light; He inflicts punishments and it is He who bears it; He is the prisoner and He is the jailor; He is action, He is illusion and yet He punishes both as Yama, the God of Death and as Time; He speaks and yet He is inarticulate; He is formless and yet with form; He is the strange artist and all the art objects; He is the yogi, the one who has renounced and has attained the Devine, He is also the *bhogi*, the one who enjoys.

It is quite pertinent that Bhima Bhoi was aware that neither Veda nor Vedanta have been able to determine the Brahman, the ineluctable and changeless reality which underlies all the transient and fleeting appearances. Brahman is not an object of perception so the Brahman remains beyond space and time, beyond the scope of reason, logic and knowledge. He is attainable only through his blessings and grace wholeheartedly and give up all ego (**Mohapatra. S, p.37, 2017**). Bhima Bhoi was no mystic used to get into trances, he believed in the power of intense carving of the soul for the divine to bring about the purification of the individual existence. In Brahma Nirupana Gita he does not thus attach much importance to scholastic knowledge as embodied in the Vedas, puranas or other traditional lores to comprehend His nature and characters. Rather, Bhima Bhoi has made a reference to the sound of his *veena* and *khanjani* (Tambourine). The soundless sound of his *veena* can be listened only through *dhyana yoga*. The road leads to that void where there is eternal spring, where hunger and thirst do not affect the soul. It was that road which he constantly kept in mind and wanted to achieve, the true vision of the ultimate Reality.

Before we examine the metaphysical basis of this unique dharma let me state in brief the historical facts that created the ground for the propagation and nurturing of its high ideals as well as an apparently abstruse metaphysics. We must note that Mahima philosophy is very much unlike the philosophical systems of India. In such system of thought there exists a gap however thin between speculative philosophical theories and the level of practice. Such philosophical/metaphysical systems were developed more or less for academic and intellectual purposes rather than percolating them down to the level of practice. Moreover, Mahima preaches a system of non-dualism in which the highest reality, though subject of prayer and bhakti, is ineffable, non-nameable (anama), non-describable (avyakta and alekha), form-less (*arupa*) non-categorizable (*nirguna*) in nature. A peep into the history of Indian cultural tradition reveals that such a form of non-dualism has never found popularity among the common people. So Upnishadic non-dualism lot its place to *pannic* conception dualistic theism. Similarly, the Buddhist theory of Sunyavada was replaced by *Tantric* Buddhism. It is very difficult even for an elite, forget about the common people, to translate the non-dualistic philosophy into practice. Even Sankaracharys, who championed the non-dualistic *Brahmanavada*, never was tired of composing hymns for the personal Gods and Goddesses. So it sometimes appears perplexing how the people from the downtrodden section of Odisha very happily absorbed a system of philosophy that neither believes in a personal God, nor prescribes rites and rituals so very common in the post-*pannic* ages.

Mahima Dharma rose like a phoenix in the second half of the 19th Century. During that phase the land witnessed the worst form of Hindu rigidity. The entire Jagannatha dharma that symbolized a wonderful syncretism of diverse religious sentiments and also stood for a unique sort of openness turned in to the preserve of the royalty and the high caste *Brahmins*. There was a sudden reversal towards unprecedented religious orthodoxy. This attitude might have resulted from sense of insecurity evoked by the establishment of the first Christian mission sometimes in 1862. Whatever might be the cause of such religious rigidity, the fact remains that the door of the *Jagannatha* temple was closed for the people of the lower strata of the society. Thus for a large section of the society *Jagannatha* became an exclusive and distinct Lord. The second important factor that acted as a catalyst for a changed religious attitude of the downtrodden was the great famine of Odisha, famously known as '*Naaaka Durbhiksa*', sometimes in 1966. The poor people virtually starved and one third of them were wiped away. But what added to their humiliation was the attitude of the society at large regarding the observance of the norms of the caste. These people were ostracized as *chatrakhiyas* for partaking the cooked food in the relief camps (*chatra*) organized by the colonial administration. These hapless people were treated as social out-caste. So a sense of severe resentment was brewing among the within a section of the society. All such factors created a psyche that proved fertile for a new form of life that could at least guarantee such down-trodden and oppressed people a place under the sun. This was the period when *Mahima Svami* appeared on the scene as the redeemer of the hopeless. He preached a new of looking at God as well as the life as a whole.

The metaphysical scheme Mahima Dharma that may help us to understand the link between the theory and its manifestation in the level of social reconstruction. *Mahima Svami*'s message was clear and simple. There is but one reality/God who has often been addresses in the Mahima literature as *Sunya-Brahman*, *Alekha* and *Mahima*. This reality transcends all categories of conceptualization and thought. Thus it is described with such negative predicates as *alekha* (not written), *arupa* (formless), *adrsys* (not visible), *anakara* (infinite), *avyakta* (inexpressible), *anama* (without name), *nirvikara* (unchanging), *nirvikalpa* (without imagine). The only positive predicate applied to this ultimate reality is Mahima implying the glorious and powerful one. From the presupposition it follows that the God cannot be caught within the frame of a form or idol. Such a God does not *neet* rituals, offerings any pomp or show for his propitiation. Even it challenged the supremacy of *Jagannatha* (who by that time was treated as an exclusive property of the higher caste) by portraying as the first disciple of *Mahima Svami*. Thus the system of thought and practice offered a ray a solace to the oppressed class who badly needed a social and religious anchor. The *Alekha Sunya Brahma*- the highest reality-for them is nothing but *sadhana* that ultimately culminates in jnana-bhakti yoga. One has to prepare personally for the path through moral perfection. Therefore Mahima Dharma speaks of morality at two levels- individual and social. Though the reality is conceived as ineffable yet it is not just an abstract metaphysical principle. His presence is manifest in the whole creation as the visible universe is the manifestation of sunya Brahman. He is all-pervading (*bibhu*). As non-compromising non-dualist Mahima Dharma holds that there is no distinction between the animate and the inanimate; between the man and the man; and between the individual self (Brahman) and the individual self (*jivatman*). So serving God means service to the humanity. God being all-pervasive each human being partakes of the divinity. So logically it follows that there should be no discrimination in the human society on the basis of caste and creed, pure and polluted, rich and poor. The only path suggested for approaching such a God is unconditional bhakti. But a man could be fit for bhakti only through the path of the purity of the heart and truthfulness. Mahima Dharma offered a theory of philosophy that may not at first sight may appear very unique. The non-dualistic metaphysics is regarded as the hall-mark of the Upanishad, that was later systematized by Sankaracarya. He too offered a scheme of metaphysics cantered on the concept of the uniqueness of the Brahman. Brahman too is regarded by him as the ground of the phenomenal world. But when it came to the level of practice it appeared too abstract and abstruse for a common man to follow.

The *Sunya Brahman* or *Alekha* is the indwelling spirit in every being. Brahman being ineffable can be understood in no other than the spiritual experience. Such spiritual experience needs a preparation in two levels- individual and social. In the individual level one has to attain the moral purity. So Bhima Bhoi warns that,

'This is not the dharma of the sadhu or *mahanta*. This is much different from that. This is not a form of *sadhana* meant for the show or pomposity. Such *bhakti* is not enough for attaining the Brahman'. (*Stuti-Chintamani*, 83.)

However dharma and bhakti is not only confined to individual morality. *Mahiman Dharama* drew the whole-hearted support from a large section of the society in the name of *sanatan dharma*, that champions social disparity. From the works of Bhima Bhoi we get a broad picture of the-then society. So a perfect social morality is an important for this dharma as the moral perfection in the individual level. Without a harmonious society the perfection in the individual life is not possible. The historical compulsion for the genesis of Mahima Dharma finds expression in its concern for the society. Expecting Buddhism no other form of traditional dharma showed such a great amount of concern for the causes of degradation as well as the uplift of the society. It is no wonder in Mahima congregation they never pray for the selfish goals but for the redemption and the well-being of the whole. There are perhaps very few examples of a dharma in practice that holds the well-being of the world as the primary concern. Bhima Bhoi being a child of the times felt its pangs more deeply than any other follower

and scholar of Mahima Dharma. He was directly initiated by Mahima Svami and was commanded by him to preach the essence of Mahima Dharma through the lyrical bhajans and poetic compositions. This is why we find that he pours out his heart in his poems to record the plight of the –then society.

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