

Bhima Bhoi, Bhakti and Mahima Dharma

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Abstract

Social injustice, inequality, and humiliation have been the fate of the low caste people in Orissa through centuries. Rebellion against their upper caste Hindu counterpart was negligible, and violent outbursts of anger were rare in nineteenth century Orissa. However, many voices in literary form have been raised fighting for the oppressed class. There has been a deeply-felt need to remove these inequalities and instill dignity in them. This dignity and respect were denied to the low caste people who were exploited at the hands of the rich, the Rajas, and the Brahmins on the pretext of the prevalent Jagannath cult. Lord Jagannath had become the God of the high caste people and had become inaccessible to the Adivasis and low caste people. But with Bhima Bhoi's verses there was an upsurge in the protest against the established social structure, attacking the caste system, untouchability, and low status of Shudras and women and promoted equality, humanism, and awareness. This paper critically analyses the various works of Bhima Bhoi, who opposed the prescribed Vedas and Dharmasastras and resisted priesthood, ritual practice, pilgrimage, and idol worship. Bhima Bhoi's verses bear testimony to the social protest movement that had taken place at the turn of the nineteenth century. He protested against the rigid practices of Hinduism. He sought to rise above religion that degraded the low caste people and, in doing so, faced criticism and opposition from the high caste.

Keywords: Protest, Mahima Dharma, Bhima Bhoi, Bhakti, Equality.

Introduction

Bhima Bhoi's writings are literature of reformation and emancipation, where he employed his talents to awaken the public against the injustice happening all around. His verses carry in their gamut the most stirring and thought-provoking writings on the struggle of humanity and injustices that the oppressed had suffered. His writings have proved a potent weapon to jolt society and wake them from its slumber of indifference and apathy. His verses echo the words of Martin Luther King, Jr "Let us stand with a greater determination" (*Say It Plain* 84). Bhima Bhoi mobilized the low caste individuals to attack against the atrocities they suffered and was determined to infuse dignity and self-respect, which were seized forcibly from

them. All the low caste people stood together to fight against the hegemony and dominance of the Brahmins. Hence time and again, he has discredited idol worship, the worship of Jagannath and Vedas in his poems which was the reason for the caste-based society, discrimination and exclusion.

Aim of The Study

This paper aims to bring forth the views of Bhima Bhoi, who fought for the rights and liberties of the low caste people of Orissa. Bhima Bhoi was committed to spread the one true religion, Mahima Dharma, and preached it wherever he traveled. For this act, he had to incur many rebuke and abuse from the orthodox Hindus. He writes:

Their minds are steeped in ignorance
and wicked are the high born.
When I speak of you as without desire,
Oh, Svami, they just twist their mustaches in pride. (Baumer and Beltz 127)

He became the target of mockery and ridicule and was even beaten up. He had been driven away from many places for corrupting Hindu practices. People had deep faith in idol worship for their liberation and salvation. Without understanding the mantras, the Brahmins learned it by heart, smeared vermilion on their forehead and projected themselves to be pious persons. They earned money in different religious and social functions by chanting the wrong mantras. This had become a source of business for them, and Bhima Bhoi had become a threat to their business and hence was named as an imposter. In every step of his life, he had to tolerate pain and torture, and therefore he writes:

They recite the scriptures and are confused,
never finding the path of knowledge.
When I say there is only one Bragman,
they call this illusion confusion. (127)

Further, he writes: "People have adopted the new path by deserting truth and engaging themselves in intricacies and falsehood. Unable to distinguish between nectar and poison, the pious and learned are inclined towards the latter" (Bahinipati 83).

Bhima Bhoi aimed to create a broader social framework by dismantling the present society that divided people into high and low. By inducing believers into the fold of Mahima, he wanted to create a world of justice and equality without distinction; this can happen when everyone embraces the Almighty Aleka. He writes: "All men and women belonging to thirty-six clans and fifty-two professions should take refuge in the name of Almighty shading aside any superior and inferior complexity" (86).

He believes that caste and class distinction is artificial where the supreme caste people exploit the low caste in the name of religion. The high-caste people reap benefits from their superior position. When all are the children of Brahman, how can they make any differentiation? Bhima Bhoi questioned the concept of such division of human society into jati (caste). He writes:

We are of the higher caste.
 Thus they vent their shallow arrogance.
 All such divisions of thirty-six classes and fifty-two sub-classes
 They are not to be called jatis.
 We have created all the divisions.
 Based on who should touch the water
 From whose house. (T. Patnaik 135)

Further, Bhima Bhoi urges the high caste people to forget about this differentiation and to accept everyone for a peaceful existence: "May you never discriminate between A brahmana and a candala / May you never bother about jati and gotra" (135). True religion always aims at equality and justice. It never divides people into high and low. He describes jati (caste): "God has created only two forms – man and woman. Apart from these two jatis O wise man see, there is no third caste" (136). Hence for devotees of Mahima, equality (Samata) is an essential attribute, and the sense of equality leads to compassion and understanding. A faithful follower of Mahima will defy any sort of discrimination and division and promote fairness, justice, and equality between all. 'Samata' between one and the other is a crucial concept of Mahima Dharma. Mahima Swami's tenets are reflected in the following lines: "In the realm of the Indescribable no one is big or small / He sees all creatures with equal eyes" (Baumer and Beltz 305).

He often uses the word 'samacita' (a heart that treats everybody as equal) and 'saman drasti' (an eye that sees everybody as equal) in his verses. "Mahima's conception of Samata envisions equality of human beings between people and the universe as a whole"(T. Patnaik 142). Mahima Dharma distinguishes between a saint and a sinner, a servant, a master, or even an insect or a bird. All are equal in the eyes of Mahima. More than that, Mahima is omnipresent. He is present in the living and non-living beings. He resides in humans, stones, woods, and trees. Bhima Bhoi writes:

Be they wicked or saintly, servant or master,
 insect or bird, you permeate all.
 I see you equally in all beings,
 now more minor than in another. (Baumer and Beltz 167)

Once Samata (equality) between God, man, and creation is established, it results in immeasurable compassion for humanity. Degradation of values and unscrupulous social

practice move him. His selfless love for his fellowmen makes him a non-compromising crusader against social discrimination. Hinduism, in its decadent form, was instrumental in dividing people. "Religious obscurantism coupled with the diseased social outlook heightened the suffering of the common person. Brahminism in its general form floated views and doctrines which made people feel that God is prerogative of the select few" (Panigrahi 64). Bhima Bhoi wanted to revive the spirit of unity and equality and hence preached a religion that made no distinctions on caste, color, and creed and cultivated the values of love, compassion, and non-violence. But the present social scenario was the opposite of what he preached. Degenerate religious practices and devaluation of values moved him, and he faithfully admits: "I suffer every pang as the sorrows /and sufferings of all beings pierce my heart" (Baumer and Beltz 163). He is unable to bear the evil and ruthless ways of society. Hence he fervently wishes for salvation for everyone. He no longer wants to survive in this Kali Yuga and asks Mahima for his guidance. Hence he writes:

I was born in *Kaliyuga* to suffer.
Misfortune falls upon me.
Oh, Aleka, who roams the Void,
what shall I do? I find no escape. (221)

The world is immersed in numerous misdeeds, offence, and sin. There is no one to save humanity from their deeds. But it is only 'Alekh Param Brahma' who can save humanity and establish truth and justice. He writes: "He alone will protect the new world" (Bahinipati 100). Man is unable to differentiate between good and evil. He is preoccupied with violence, deceit, betrayal, and infidelity. He resorts to all atrocious and terrible deeds. Bhima is deeply concerned about such conduct and advises:

Keep in control of desire, anger, greed, attachment, trickery, enmity, violence, and hatred through the conception of knowledge. Leave falsehood, slander, and establish firm faith in nirvana; by invoking a sense of service, drink the nectar from the feet of Satguru. (Bahinipati 100)

Humans are the beloved creation of the Almighty and hence are precious. His birth is meant for the well-being and welfare of society. One must help and assist each other in difficult times. The purpose of life is to be kind, compassionate, and helpful to everyone. But man has fallen victim to the stupefying illusion of the world, and his soul is wandering, undirected, and purposeless. Bhima tries to give direction and purpose to man's precious life. He writes:

Practice truth and the burden of sin will recede. God has conferred life to human beings, which is valuable and rare, but man is ruining it by falling into the

clutches of illusion and indulging themselves in worldly attachment. They are becoming unhealthy and wicked as demons. (101)

He is deeply hurt and offended when people call him a Christian for spreading the religion of the indescribable one. Mahima Dharma was not only a revolt against the atrocities of caste systems; it was also a revolt against the Christian missionaries who They were propagating their alien faith and converting the indigenous people. He writes:

People abuse me,
they call me a Christian,
and when I call on you, Lord Aleka,
you punish me with unbearable suffering. (Baumer and Beltz 125)

He was concerned that the alien rulers with their religion were influencing people and converting them while the glory and power of the Brahman remained unknown. These people remained ignorant of the one true God – Alekha and sought foreign religion. He even discarded that neither Hinduism nor Christianity or any other religion cannot give them shelter and protection from the evil and immoral world. Hence he writes:

Trapped, they shall be in wickedness, treachery,
immorality, injustice, and misdeeds.
What Dharma can shelter them?
What path can they take to cross over? (147)

To prove that he is not a Christian but an ardent follower of Alekha, he proclaims that "the indescribable deity is my Supreme God; he is the Guru of my soul." (247). He has surrendered himself to his Guru, and his love and devotion are for his Guru only. He shares the suffering, agonies, and frustrations with him. Sometimes Bhima Bhoi uses 'Guru' and 'Anadi Purusa/Alekha Mahima' (Supreme Being). This sometimes creates confusion in the reader's mind, that is, whether he accepts his Guru Mahima Swami to be the ultimate reality or he refers to some other Reality Supreme. Sometimes Bhima Bhoi uses the term 'guru' to refer to Mahima Swami as the anthropomorphic form of 'Alekha Mahima Param Brahman' (the Highest Being).

According to S.C. Panigrahi, Bhima Bhoi does not always mean an embodied person when he says 'guru .'" For him, the ultimate reality or Mahima is both the knowledge per se and the supreme knower of the Guru. For him, the spiritual guide is no longer a human being" (52).

His reference to 'guru' does not stand for an anthropomorphic form but for Anakara (formless), Arupananda (ethereal bliss), Alekha (indescribable) and Sunya Prabhu Para-

Brahman (the Highest Being). He establishes his difference from the Christians who worship an anthropomorphic God. The word 'anthropomorphism' comes from two Greek words, 'Anthropos' meaning 'man' and 'morphe' meaning 'form'. 'Anthropomorphic deities exhibited human qualities such as beauty, wisdom, power, and weaknesses such as anger and jealousy. Jesus had manifested himself in human form with the human emotion of sorrow, envy, and pity: "The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth and his heart was filled with pain" (*Holy Bible* 6) and also states: "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God" (55). Jesus had a form and a body and resided in a particular place. But Mahima's God is Sunya and lives in Sunya, and from this Sunya, creation has taken place – "Alekhya Purusa creates everything. / Nobody else could do so" (Baumer and Beltz 247).

The thought of being addressed as 'a Christian' is utterly and entirely revolting to Bhima Bhoi. Aleka has created him, and when he was labeled as a Christian, it was highly disrespectful and disparaging for a devoted follower of Aleka. In a few lines, he had inherently suggested the difference between Mahimaism and Christianity and denounced being nicknamed a Christian. Repeatedly he sang songs of the divinity of Mahima who protects and gives shelter to everyone, be it high or low: "He is the only path, the master, the guide, the savior / and the well-wisher of the devout" (313).

It was Bhima's call to all those who were leaving their indigenous religion and were attracted to the colonists' religion. The people must put faith in their indigenous religion, which offers them respect, dignity, and freedom from the established Hindu religion and not something which belongs to a foreign, alien, and distant place. Hence, he calls out to his fellow human being to recognize the beauty of Mahima Dharma and to worship Mahima to make their life free from tyranny and brutality:

Without realizing the highest Lord,
this precious life becomes useless.
In ignorance, people worship
whichever God is most pleasing to their nature. (279)

Even though Bhima Bhoi did not launch a scathing attack on Christianity as he did on the Brahminical order through his verses, it is comprehensible that he resented the presence of Christian missionaries amongst the natives who were trying to take them away from one true God, Aleka. Brahma is the one true God and the noble path for Deliverance and everyone must completely surrender to him. He writes:

You will eliminate illusion and delusion if you take shelter under the Brahma. If you serve a big person, you will get something big. Now apply your intelligence

and serve God. By remaining in the body, meditate on the formless (Brahma). Then you will get rid of your difficulties. (Bahinipati 103)

In *Brahmanirupana Gita*, Bhima Bhoi attempts to define the Brahman and the philosophical theory of Alekha Dharma. It is composed in a dialogue form between 'guru' and 'sisya'. It is a valuable book for the Alekha follower as it provides appropriate answers on 'Nirakara Brahma,' 'Brahma Nirupama,' and 'Brahma Rupa'. He adopted this style to touch the heart of people so they could easily understand the more profound and nuanced theories of Mahima Philosophy. The physical body of 'Alekha Purusa' is described as 'Nigam Bhuban' or 'Aman Mandir'. According to the poet, this Nigam Bhuban is a glorious place with no day or night, no light or darkness, nor the feeling of winter and summer. This place is above creation and destruction. There is no desire, wish, lust, the bondage of birth and death, sex, sleep, hunger, or thirst. There is also no barrier between high-low, purity-pollution, and good-bad. Aleka is neither male nor female nor young and old. Tandra Patnaik has presented a summary of Bhima's explication of the true significance of the term Brahman-bhakti. She writes:

The nature of *Brahman-bhakti* is unique. Let your heart be full of peace, gentleness, compassion, and forgiveness. Let not anger in any form seize your mind, for offense demolishes all *jnana*. Let you be like mother earth, ever tolerant. As rainwater falls on everything that comes in its way without discriminating whether it is pleasant or unpleasant; as sunlight brightens everything whether it smells good or bad; as the wind blows through every possible space; you also become all-encompassing without making any discrimination between the high-born and low-born, between rich and poor. Any form of discrimination between man and man based on caste and creed leads to *Dharma*. (111)

Bhima Bhoi attempts to define the nature and qualities of Brahman in *Brahmanirupana Gita*, particularly in Canto 4. The description is through a series of binary opposition or pair of contradictions arising out of situations, qualities, and objects. Sitakanta Mahapatra has summed up these contradictions:

He is the disciple, and He is the Guru; He is darkness, and He is light; He inflicts punishment, and it is He who bears it; He is the prisoner, and He is the jailor; He is action, He is an 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 Divine, He is also the bhogi, the one who enjoys. (37)

Bhima writes that it is impossible to experience Brahman through Vedas and Shastras. It is challenging to learn about the divinity of Brahman through any textual discourse. Brahman lies beyond the scope of logic, reason, and knowledge, so realizing or understanding him through academics is beyond possibility. Brahman can be attained through exceptional craving. The craving that a child has for his mother. Brahman forgives our sins if we seek His mercy. He is ever graceful and all merciful. Hence Brahman cannot be experienced through Vedas and Puranas. Even the thirty-three crore Gods, the innumerable yoginis (female ascetics), and rishis (saints) cannot comprehend his power. He rejects the educational books to provide any understanding of Brahman. The only way to get to nirguna Brahma is to worship his name. The concept of 'niskama bhakti' or 'brahman bhakti' is probably one of the most outstanding contributions of Mahima Dharma. Bhakti is categorized as 'sakama bhakti' and 'niskama bhakti'. Sakama Bhakti is inspired by a desire for something, whether material or spiritual. But in niskama bhakti there is no desire. It is only when the mind is free from all imperfection then only one can experience the Supreme Reality.

Bhima Bhoi was a compelling successor of Mahima Gosain, who disseminated Mahima Dharma with solid devotion and fellow-feeling among the people. Mahima Dharma followed the practice of community eating, who sat down and ate together. They accepted cooked food from every household and ate it together, challenging the norms of caste and the rules of commensality. The devotees of Mahima took cooked food from all lower caste and untouchables, thus debunking the concept of purity and pollution in receiving cooked food. At the same time, they did not accept food from the Brahmins displaying their contempt for them and their superiority. The Mahima followers gave utmost importance to community living, fellow feeling, and brotherly care and affection as opposed to the dissection of the society into high and low because of caste.

Conclusion

Accepting the systems of other religions, Bhima Bhoi, in many ways, rejected and rebelled against the traditional method of Hinduism. The true philosophy of Mahima Dharma was represented by Bhima Bhoi, which inspired many followers to accept this faith. He is the poet of the first order with a unique choice of words, similes, metaphors, lyricism, and depth of emotion. It was believed that he composed four bhajans at a time and dictated them to his four scribes, Hari Panda, Basu Panda, Markanda Dasa and Dharmananda Dasa. His Bhajans became an essential part of Mahima worship which attained the status of the Holy Scripture for them. The followers of this Dharma belonged to the lower and oppressed section of the society with no access and knowledge of the spiritual theories. For them, survival in this explosive situation was more critical than being preoccupied with philosophy. Yet Bhima Bhoi, with his lucid language, could dive into the heart of the people and inspire them with his concepts of Sunya-Brahman. He chose the indigenous language and the lyrical form to reach out to the people so they could quickly understand and remember the verses.

His love and compassion for the low and the high, literate and non-literate, give his poetry both personal and universal appeal. It bridges the gulf between the high and severe esoteric literature, philosophy, religious beliefs, and literary feelings of ordinary people. (Dube and Beltz 115)

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