

**ŚŪNYATĀ: A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION
ON MAHIMĀ DHARMA**

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In the last quarter of nineteenth century and early part of twentieth century a Hindu religious cult prevailing among the hilly regions of central and western Odisha propagate a new wave of humanism in the social and religious life, called *Mahimā Dharma* or Alekha Cult. It was a period of transition from medieval to modern times in the history of India as well as Odisha. The beginning of this movement can be assigned to various factors underlying in the socio-economic and cultural life predominant at that time. The widespread corruptions, malpractices, oppression destabilized the society and further compartmentalized the caste and class ridden society. The coming of the British and their colonial policies brought no immediate relief to the people who suffered at the hands of the native autocratic rulers and chiefs. The myopic policies of the rulers both native and foreign dampen the spirit of freedom and progress of the people. A natural calamity is the greatest hindrance always for the life of Odisha. The people were worst-hit on account of the repeated famines, in accessible roads, non-recognition of the native language, division among the native rules some of whom exploited the men of the soil, some others supported the British rule and, were in conflict among themselves. In this hour of all round confusion, the *Mahimā* Movement was initiated by the illustrious *Mahimā Gosain* with the sole purpose to reviving the restoring truth, non-violence, equality and justice in the society. It is difficult to have a systematic study of the *Mahimā* Movement and *Mahima Dharma* as the founder *Mahimā Gosain* has left no religious scripture of this faith. From 1862 to onwards, he started his journey for the propagation of the new *Mahimā Dharma* among the people, enacted a number of disciples and entrusted them with the task of spreading the message of love, piety, truth and justice among the lowly, deprived and desolate people. He preached in a lucid manner the various concepts of śūnya, mukti, ahimsa etc., which formed the philosophy of *Mahimā Dharma*. *Mahimā Gosain* was the founder of the movement. The early life of *Mahimā Gosain* is still covered in obscurity. History depicts, in 1828 AD a man probably known as Mukunda Das came to Kapilas and initiated practised yoga. Later he came to be known as *Mahimā Gosain*. In 1872 *Mahimā Gosain* started spreading his spiritual and social philosophy in different parts of Odisha. The philosophy of *Mahimā Dharma* has been beautifully and lucidly described by *Santha*

Kabi Bhima Bhoi whose writings are available for the study of this religion. In his innumerable writings he demonstrated the passionate cry of the common people for their birthright i. e., equality, fraternity and social justice in the society. Many thinkers say that the history of Mohimā Movement will be incomplete without *Santha Kabi* Bhima Bhoi. The illustrious Mahimā *sanyāsi* like *Abadhuta* Biswanāth Bābā and Mahindra Bābā have contributed to promote study of this religion. The first official history of Mahimā Dharma was written by Biswanāth Bābā.¹ The household devotees like Nāran Sahu, Arta Ballav Mahanty, Ratnakar Pati, Mayadhar Mansingh, Satrugna Nath, Sarbeswar Das, Chitaranjan Das, A. Eschmann, Nilamani Senapati, Harihar Patel and others have led the spirit of Mahimā Dharma. Bhima Bhoi's poems and *bhajan*s unambiguously symbolize the models of profound schools of thought. As Mahimā Swāmi had not written or composed any of his ideologies concerning the faith of him, it was Bhima Bhoi who carried out the unrealized tasks of his master. He demonstrates a unique synthesis of *jñāna*, *karma* and *bhakti* attaining in the actualization of the absolute thought as *Mahimā* and *Śūnya*. He did not write poetry for the sake of literature. He has written what he felt the sorrow and suffering of the underprivileged people of that period. His conception of *Śūnyavāda* can be found much similarity with the absolutism of *Advaita Vedānta* and the *Śūnyavāda* of *Buddhist* but it is not a specified replica of the two philosophies. His fundamental philosophical prospect is the universal humanistic appeal.

Mahimā Dharma and Bhima Bhoi:

We know about the philosophy and poetry of Bhima Bhoi but it is difficult to have a thoroughgoing account of the life-history of Bhima Bhoi.² We do not know for certain when and where he was born, who his parents were, his early education etc. However, it is clear from his writings that he belonged to the indigenous family known as Kandha. He spent his early life in the village Jatasingha near Subalaya of Subarnapur district, Odisha. The village culture of Odisha which was encouraged in the *Bhagavat Tungis*³ stimulated Bhima Bhoi to open his creative thinking. It was, so to say, the spiritual and cultural atmospheres of the *Bhagavat Tungis* developed the literary acumen and metaphysical insight of Bhima Bhoi. He received no formal education, but he had a magnificent recollective memory and sweet voice. At an early stage of his poetic life he started composing *bhajan*s the first of which is said to be

*vandanā pāda padmaku; dhyāyi guru payaraku.*⁴ In his locality Bhima Bhoi had already gathered popularity as a spiritual singer and composer before his conversion to *Mahimā dharma*. Bhima Bhoi's literary canon is prolific. His important works, comprising *Stuti Chintāmani*, *Bhajana Mālā*, *Brahma Nirupaṇa Gitā*, *Ādi-Anta Gitā*, *Aṣṭaka Bihāri Gitā*, *Cautiśā Mālā*, *Nirveda Sādhana*, *Sṛuti Niṣedha Gitā*, *Manu Sabhā Maṇḍala*, *Padma Kalpa*, *Brahmchaḷka*, *Purna Samhiṭā*, *Brahma Sanjukta Gitā*, *Navin Bihāri Gitā*, *Ahimsā Dharma Brahma Gitā*, *Kaḷi Yuga Gitā* and others.

The *Mahimā Dharma* was a socio-religious movement. In this movement there is no consideration of caste, creed, colour, occupation, social status, prestige, power, position, wealth etc. In this Dharma, the common human being is the main concern. A man belonging to any category is admitted to the *Mahimā* faith for the purpose of realization and prayer of *Brahma* for a simple and sacred life. With the passage of time the cult also had its influence in the neighbouring states like West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.⁵ Like all other religious reform movement of the time, it emerged as a reactionary movement against orthodox Hinduism. The *Mahimā dharma* had revolted against Hindu idol worship, against the age long caste society predominated by the *Brahmins* and against the surpassing rich people. The sole purpose of the movement is to reestablish the much needed equality, truth and justice in the society. The teachings were simple and apprehensible by the rural people. *Āśramas* and *tungis* were built to accommodate the *sādhus*, and *sanyāsis*. *Mandiras* such as the *Dhuni Mandira* (fire temple), *Śūnya Mandira* (empty temples) were built. Rules, regulations, *ritis*, *nitis*, have come into existence with the coming up of these *Mandiras*. All system of Indian Philosophy contains a practical aspect called *sādhana*. Thus the theoretical aspects of philosophy can be applied to everyday life. The *Mahimā* cult also laid sufficient stress on disciplined habits to control the body and the mind. They take no dinner; touch no food which is too salty or too sweet or too bitter. They do *sarana* and *darsana*, pray food only once from a family, stay only a day in a village.⁵ They exercise truth, non-violence and believe in one God and one caste. For Mahimites the religion is not to be advocated but applied. The followers should avoid falsehood, egoism and do practice non-violence, truthfulness, kindness, peace, simplicity, forgiveness and control of six-passion like lust, anger, covetousness, fascination, pride, spite. They should not use luxurious and

expansible bed for comfortable sleep. They should dedicate themselves to *Parambrahma* in body, mind and words. Bhima Bhoi became the spokesman and exponent of the philosophy. The devotional appealing prayer poetries composed by Bhima Bhoi are greatly responsible for the spread of *Mahimā Dharma*. In one *bhajana* he says: [In one *rāga* I composed four songs. I am the helpless Bhima, but my Guru is all-powerful, under his fearless banner I have taken shelter and drink the nectar from his feet. With his grace I see the inner and outer reality with the eyes of knowledge.]⁷ The concepts like *Alekha*, *Mahimā*, *Puruṣa*, *Brahman*, *Śūnya* are the key conceptions of Bhima Bhoi's literature. His metaphysical notion of *Mahimā* is the concept of *Śūnyabrahma* which follows necessarily from his conception of *Alekha Mahimā Brahman*. It is significant to note that the term 'Mahimā' and 'Brahma' are synonymously used in the *Mahimā* literature. The ultimate reality is addressed as *Mahimā*. *Alekha* is significant of the nature of *Mahimā*. *Alekha* literally means something which does not have a fixed contour or determinate form. *Mahimā* and *Alekha* are the denotative and connotative aspects of one and the same reality.⁸ The holy phrase 'Mahimā Alekha' which is accorded as the status of mantra in the system contains the essence of the system.

The Concept of Śūnya and Mahimā Dharma:

The etymological significance of the word *śūnya* denotes its preferred translation is "void". But neither the orthodox tradition (*āstika*) nor the heterodox (*nāstika*) tradition use the term with such negative implications. Thus, the term *śūnya* is not entirely negative in its implication. The term *śūnya* is variously interpreted. To some it means nothingness, to others a permanent principle, transcendent and indefinable, immanent in all things. *Śūnyatā* is an important Buddhist teaching which claims that nothing possesses essential nature or *svabhāva*, enduring identity because everything is interconnected in a chain of co-becoming and in a state of constant flux. All things being impermanent, nothing can be seen as having an independent, lasting form of existence. All phenomena come into being because of conditions created by other phenomena. The Mahāyāna tradition has put a special emphasis on *śūnyatā*. The way Nāgārjuna uses the term *śūnyatā*; it should stand neither for void nor for absolute negation. When Nāgārjuna argues that things are empty of *svabhāva* it is not this notion of essence he is concerned with. The philosophically more important

understanding of *svabhāva* is an understanding in terms of substance. Śaṅkarācārya, in his commentary analyses this term as ‘*savisesa rahita tvat śūnyata*’ (it is without determination, hence like *śūnya*).⁹ It is interesting to note that Sankara’s theory of *Brahman*, which comes closest to Nāgārjuna’s philosophy of *śūnya*. *Śūnya*, as per Nāgārjuna’s theory, stand for ultimate Reality (*tattva*). While defining *tattva* he ascribes to it certain characteristics, which do not allow us to be convinced that the word *śūnya* means total annihilation, as interpreted by Śaṅkara. According to Nāgārjuna, *śūnya* is a principle about which neither existence nor nonexistence, nor a combination of both, nor the negation of both, can be predicated. In other words it is an indeterminate, ineffable and non-describable principle. Śaṅkara too interprets *Brahman* as indescribable (*avyakta*) and *nirguna* (transcending determination through ascription of qualities) and *nivikalpa* (beyond concepts).

In Bhima Bhoi’s conception *śūnya* does not mean mere void. It is the ultimate reality. It is the ultimate end and beginning of everything. The ultimate being infinite cannot be known by the finite intellect. According to Bhima Bhoi, the *śūnya* owes its origin to the potency of the nameless entity, i.e., *alekha* or *anāma*. In *Mahimā* philosophy *Mahimā Gosain* is accepted as the incarnation of *śūnya* or *alekha*. When there was nothing there was only *śūnya*. *Śūnya Brahman* is the same as *Purna Brahman*. It is beyond all kinds of descriptions. But it is the source of all existence. *Śūnya* also has an ontological sense in *Mahimā* metaphysics. Bhima Bhoi, the devotee bears on his entire poetic creativeness to describe the guru or *avatāra*. The guru is unique and the divine glory is beyond description. It is said that, *Mahimā Dharma* always went against image worship. More or less the religious and philosophical tents of *Advaita Vedānta*, *Buddhism* and *Jainism* were travelled into the cult which gained popularity among the depressed section of the society. The Buddhist believes that in the ultimate there is nothing, but to the *Alekhist*, there is only one after all the appearances disappear. That again has no appearance. Like *Advaita Vedānta*, the Mahimaites believe in Monism, but it does not accept *Māyā* as the cause of creation. It is taken up more with the injury and suffering of the people. The ultimate reality, *Mahimā* being philanthropic and kind to the followers knows the limitation of the finite being. The most remarkable contribution which brought Bhima

Bhoi the national and international recognition is expressed in the words: “Let my life suffer eternally in the hell, but let the entire world be salvaged”.¹⁰

The primary aim which stands out in and through the writings of the philosopher-poet Bhima Bhoi is his utter concern and empathy for the fellow men and passionate eagerness to help them come out of the state of decadence and suffering. According to Bhima Bhoi, the empirical knowledge and the practice of rites and rituals are not the path of salvation. *jñāna*, *karma* and *bhakti* known as the golden path to the realization of the Brahman (*śūnya*). Salvation for him meant a life of perfection. He did not seek for a *vedāntic mukti* of losing one’s identity. Bhima Bhoi encourages his followers to follow the tents of *yama* and *niyama*. One must abandon *kāma* and *moha* as it images the very purpose of *sādhana*. Here to say that Bhima Bhoi’s humanism surpasses man does not imply that it is transcendental – rather it means removal of ignorance and search for the innate divinity. Bhima Bhoi’s verses resound with this oneness and uniqueness of *Alekha*:

He is neither the teacher nor the disciple; no master nor slave has He,

Neither a Brahman, nor an infidel, He is the greatest of all.

He belongs to no tribe, casteless, He is the most blameless,

The two rule the world as one mind and one soul.¹¹

Humano-centric Versus God-centric

The concepts like *Alekha*, *Mahimā*, *Puruṣa*, *Brahman*, *Śūnya* are the key conceptions of Bhima Bhoi’s literature. In this movement the common human being is the main concern. Like all other religious reform movement of the time, it emerged as a reactionary movement against orthodox Hinduism. It is said that, *Mahimā Dharma* always went against image worship. Unlike other religions, it is not so much God-centric but humano-centric. The devotional appealing prayer poetries composed by Bhima Bhoi are greatly responsible for the spread of *Mahimā Dharma*. In his philosophy we find that the theology of the God is substituted by the new theology of the God *Alekha* (*śūnya*), the formless one descends in human form to help the impermeable declining human society to move the path of dharma. The *śūnya* owes its origin to the potency of the nameless entity, i.e., *alekha* or *anāma*. It admits that the world is a real creation of Him, through Him (*Mahimā*). In *Mahimā* philosophy *Mahimā Gosain* is accepted as the incarnation of *śūnya* or *alekha*. When there was

nothing there was only *śūnya*. *Śūnya Brahman* is the same as *Purna Brahman*. The Buddhist believes that in the ultimate there is nothing, but to the *Alekhist*, there is only one after all the appearances disappear. Like *Advaita Vedānta*, the Mahimaites believe in Monism, but it does not accept *Māyā* as the cause of creation. The empirical knowledge and the practice of rites and rituals are not the path of salvation. Salvation means a life of perfection, *jñāna*, *karma* and *bhakti* known as the golden path to the realization of the Brahman (*śūnya*). Loving and serving to all living and non-living is the character of a liberated soul and the path to liberation as well. Humanism means that it is not transcendental - rather it means removal of ignorance and search for the innate divinity.

Notes and References:

1. The present paper is a part of lecture that I gave at the Department of Philosophy, Jadavpur University, Kolkata in a Refresher Course on 'Contemporary Indian Philosophy'. I thank everybody who participated in the discussion.
2. See Priyadarshi Bahinipati, *The Mahima Dharma: Interpreting History, Trends and Tradition*, Gyanajuga Publication, Bhubaneswar, 2009, p. 45.
3. See S. C. Panigrahi, *Bhima Bhoi and Mahimā Darsana*, Santosh Publication, Cuttack and the collaboration with P. G. Department of Philosophy, Utkal University, 1998.
4. The *Odiya Bhagavata* of the saint-poet Jagannath Dash which was read recited and discussed by the villagers every evening in the *Tungis* in a peaceful atmosphere was a great source of inspiration for Bhima Bhoi.
5. See S. C. Panigrahi, *Bhima Bhoi and Mahima Darsana*, Santosh Publication, Cuttack and the collaboration with P. G. Department of Philosophy, Utkal University, 1998.
6. See Priyadarshi Bahinipati, *The Mahima Dharma: Its Peregrination in the Twentieth Century*, *Search*, DDCE, Utkal University, Vol. 1, January, 2013.
7. See Bhagirathi Nepak, *Mahimā Dharma, Bhima Bhoi and Biswanathbaba*, *Orissa Review*, pp. 25-30, May-2005.
8. Trns. Sitakanta Mohapatra – "Saint – poet Bhima Bhoi an Assessment," in *Santh Kavi Bhima Bhoi – All Orissa Adivasi Cultural Association*, 1996, p. 2 (English section) and I have closely follow the exposition of Professor S. C. Panigrahi's "*Bhima Bhoi and Mahimā Darsana*".
9. See Professor S. C. Panigrahi's "*Bhima Bhoi and Mahimā Darsana*".
10. See S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* (1923) Vol. I, Oxford University Press.

11. Bhima Bhoi, *Stutichintāmaṇi*, *Prāninka ārata dukha apramita dekhu dekhu keva sahu, mojobana pachhe narke padithau, jagata uddhāra heu.*
12. Bhima Bhoi, *Stutichintāmaṇi*, *'nuhanti se guru nuhanti se siṣya, nahin sāanta sevaka nuhanti brāhmaṇa nuhanti chāndāḷa nuhanti se bada loka nahin tānka jāti nahin tānka gotra na thai bachha bebhara beni jana eka ātmā mana hoi karuachhanti sansāra'*