

Mahimā Dharma: Social Movement with the Path to Ethico Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of Mahimā Dharama, a religious tradition of Odisha, is centre around the concept of God as Śunya-Bhāman 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 spirituality. Hence, it gives a new form of life that is very in consonance with the general structure of their metaphysics also.

The followers of Mahima religion constitute a minority of population. It is confined mostly to lower classes and tribals. A very few from the high castes and the educated elite are in the order. It seems that its opposition to the national cult of Jagannath did not draw people in good number into its fold. The strict norms of living might be another constraint. However, Mahima Dharma is an example of timely revival and reform with in Hinduism in the modern time. Mahima Cult was quite simple. The common men were attracted towards it because it was free from the ritualistic practice of the Brahmins. Though it a rose in Odisha during the 19th century renaissance but it was never influence by the latter. Definitely, in its doctrine it was quite different from other religious sects. Uninfluenced and unbiased by prevailing current of time. It spread spontaneously and quickly in the nook and corner of Odisha even crossed its boundary. By the second half of 19th century Mahima cult grew into a popular faith in Odisha.

It generated ray of hope among millions of Hindu who could aspire to find salvation in their own in their own traditional system by in a simple way. In the caste ridden society of Odisha, it emerged as a revolutionary cult. The idea of one God head brought out tremendous influence on the religious, social and cultural life of the people. The Mahima Cult has flourished as a solace, preaching the sense of equality and universal brotherhood towards the oppressed, exploited, downtrodden and low caste untouchable of the hinterland. This cult is a great protestant movement with revolutionary challenges. It sprang up against the Brahmnical tyranny and social inequality meted out to the lowly and down trodden. Mahima Dharma has nothing to do with caste, status, power, position and wealth. The entire world of Mahima devotees believes in one prabhu. The Mahima is formless and is one, second to none. This conception of Brahma and absolute monism is a great upnishadic idea. As a true preacher of the religion. Bhima Bhoi end endeavoured to traverse from the caste-ridden society to one of caste-free, class-free and egalitarian one. His indomitable will and unyielding prosperity towards inculcating human values among all souls irrespective of caste, creed, colour and religion are made barriers and professed and preached religion thoroughly humanistic. In purpose and practice, he is a realist and reasonable whose approach, method and technique are crying need of the hour and watch word to save the terror-ridden world

KEYWORDS: Mahimā dharma, śunya Brahman, alekha, bhakti, anāma, ṇiskāma. Spirituality.

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INTRODUCTION

Ethics and spirituality are inseparable, but they are distinguishable nonetheless. Ethics supports and sustains society and spirituality both. Without practicing ethical values, society cannot become functional nor spirituality practical. All religions have more or less common ethical essence, though they may differ in their philosophies and rituals. Ethical component of religion provides it a social base and projects four forms of governing values viz. prescriptive, preferential, permissive and proscriptive. All social functions have to abide by these values, if they are to aid society in its survival and development.

Man's fundamental problem is one of a spiritual nature. Unless our whole endeavour and energies are directed to work at the spiritual level, we cannot get beyond patchwork and palliative. The blind quest and obsessive pursuit of higher and higher standard of living rather than life relentlessly drive man towards a reckless exploitation of nature, foster atavistic forces in him and transform life into an unbearable tragedy.

Spirituality is neither anti-worldly nor other-worldly, it is this-worldly par excellence, if rightly understood and interpreted. Spirituality reminds man of his true nature, his great stature, his divinity, his glory and dignity. It is the greatest source of man's empowerment, greatest solace in adversity and greatest strength to surmount redoubtable crises of life. Mechanisation of human relationships is perhaps the greatest tragedy of human history that so blatantly afflicts our age.

Generally discussed in relation to the term “religion”, spirituality holds an important place for most of the people from believers to non-believers of any specific belief system. Religion, generally referred as an organized belief system within a relationship with the Creator/Power, is the source for many spiritual practices and spiritual approaches while spirituality can be explained under

“An ability to establish a meaningful relationship between the inner-self, others and the divine (God) through faith, hope and love”

(Issa and Pick, 2011, p.47). For Guillory (2001),

Religion is in fact a form which spirituality takes in practice.

The word “spiritual” refers to an inner life, which is deeply related with religious forms or in some way with humanistic psychology for reaching one’s greatest potential (Roof, 2003, p.138). Nowadays, the definition of spirituality is generally made independently of religion (Melé & Fontrodona, 2017). Issa and Pick (2011), who attracts attention to different interpretations of spirituality in religious and secular terms, point out the need for some people at modern workplace to develop meaning for their work and potential through their spirituality understanding and application, be it religious or secular.

Through some studies, there were seen some different categorizations of spirituality. Kosiewicz (2015) makes distinction by superficial spirituality and deep

spirituality. For him, spirituality includes expressions of superficial spirituality, a common one, and deep spirituality, the one which goes beyond ordinary experiences and transcends patterns of mass culture. Issa and Pick (2011) differentiates between religious spirituality and aesthetic spirituality. Religious spirituality includes prayers, belief of miracles and valuing, including divine truth, aiming for truth while Aesthetic spirituality includes honesty, compassion, harmony, integrity, support and balance.

The later part of the eighteenth century and particularly the early part of the Nineteenth century witnessed a series of movements within the Hindu fold for bringing out reformations in Hinduism. In this context, the Mahima movement made its appearance in Odisha whenever there was a need to wipe out superstitious beliefs and distorted rituals from religion and society.

The founder of the Mahima movement is Mahima Swami or Mahima Gosain. His early life is shrouded in obscurity. It is said that he revealed himself in a wonderful way during 1826AD.in Puri. At that time he was sleeping on the bare ground and was, therefore, known as Dhulia (dusty) Baba. For 12 years he went about Bhubaneswar, Khandagiri, Dhauligiri and Cuttack. According to Abadhuta Biswanath Baba who has written the history of Mahima Dharma, Mahima Gosain was an incarnation of ParamBrahma and had spent his life in the Himalayas before making his appearance at Puri. What he did in the Himalayas is not known.During the period of his stay at Puri, he was propagating the theory of Advaitabada which means God is one; there is no more than one God. He tried to establish his theory before the association of learned men in Puri Temple known as Mukti Mandapa Sabha. During this period he lived on water and was, therefore, called 'Nirahari Baba' which means living on water. Then he went to Kapilas hill in Dhenkanal district and meditated for 24 years during which period he put on the bark of Kumbhi tree. During the first 12 years he lived on fruits which were given to him from the forest, for the next 12 years he lived on milk which was being sent by Raja Bhagirathi Mahendra Bahadur of Dhenkanal. During his stay on Kapilas hill, one Jagannath became his disciple and renouncing his name, he assumed the name of Govinda Das Baba. He renounced all other identifications such as parentage, place of birth, age etc. He was the first of the 64 siddhas of Mahima Dharma. Mahima Gosain gave them the title of Abadhuta when they attained Siddhi or perfection. Mahima Gosain preaching his new religion of Mahima Dharma or Satya Mahima Dharma in the districts of Cuttack, Puri, Ganjam and in feudatory States of Dhenkanal, Athagarh, Hindol, Boudh, Sonapur as well as in the areas of Sambalpur and Angul attracted a large number of disciples particularly amongst the tribals and the classes which were considered lower in Brahmanical hierarchy. He established a number of centres of Mahima Dharma known as Ashram or Alekha Tungi. In 1874 he realized that his time to go back to the absolute void was near. Hestarted for his headquarters at Joranda in Dhenkanal district known as Mahima Gadi or seat of Mahima Gosain. He gave up his mortal frames on his own accord in 1876 on the 14th day of the bright fortnight of Phalguna (February-March).

The concept of Brahma or Absolute Monism of the Upanishads constitutes the cardinal thought in Mahima Dharma. It is also called 'Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma'. The Philosophical truth on which it is founded is that the ultimate reality is One and the only One; the human mind through ages has worshipped the One as manifested in many. But the true worship is, in the words of Bhima Bhoi, to come down to the stem leaving the

branches” In other words, to withdraw from many to One and the only One. The synthesis existing in Mahima cult comprehends many opposites such as Brahmanism and anti-Brahmanism, eastern and western traditions, Hinduism and Islam. In spite of all traditions, the basic Indian tradition is not completely lost. It is a unique synthesis since the uniqueness does not lie in merely placing together but in bringing up a complete harmony of the divergent philosophical and religious trends and exhibit the emergence of a new light which is a class of its own type. The ascetics or followers of Mahima Dharma have to obey certain rules of conduct (Guruagnya), which Mahima Gosain gave to his followers. Severe discipline of body, mind and soul are essential principles of astatic life in Mahima Dharma. They offer Prayers under the open sky. The prayer is mainly offered twice, the morning and the evening Brahma muhurtas. Morning Prayer, is started before dawn-break. At this time the follower lifts his hands above his head and prostrates certain manner uttering the glory of Alekh. The Praying postures are repeated for seven times. The same postures are adopted for five times during evening prayer called “Darshana”. The food habits of the followers is temperate. They don’t take even a drop of water from Sunset to the Sunrise. This is scientifically supported by the scriptural injunctions. The rituals are reduced to a minimum, as these is no idol worship, blood sacrifices or belief in spirits and deities.

The followers of Mahima or Alekha are seen to have been divided into three sects viz, the Kumbhipatias, the Kanapatias and Ashritas. The Kumbhipatias use barks of a tree called Kumbhi [careya arborea] whereas the Kanapatias use pieces of rag for their dressing. They have their matted hair, carrying sticks and disc-like palmleaf parasols. The Ashritas do not renounce the world and use red clothes which are called kasa or Gairikabasana like the Brahmachari or Jogi. Bhima Bhoi, the saint and mystic poet of Odisha was the second disciple of Mahima Gosain, the first being Govinda Das alias Jagannath Das of Balasingha of Boudh. The very essence of Mahima Dharma is echoed in the writings of Bhima Bhoi. It is learnt from his writings that Mahima Gosain himself blessed him and asked the poet to give expression to the basic teaching of Mahima Dharma. His popular works were Brahma Nirupana Gita, Nirveda Sadhana, Poorna Samhita, Shunya Rahas, Adi Samhita, Nirgun Mahatmya, Bhabisya Gupta Malika and Stuti Chintamani. His immortal work Stutichintamani contains hundred of wonderful lines breathing in strong empathy for the suffering humanity. The two famous lines of a song written by the saint-poet that find a place in the main hall of the United Nations in New York are as follows-

**“Praninka Arata Dukha Apramita Dekhu Dekhu Ke Ba Sahu Mo Jibana
Pachhe Narke Padithau Jagata Uddhara Heu”**

(Boundless is the anguish and misery of the living who can see it and tolerate Let my soul be condemned to Hell But let the Universe be redeemed)

The Bhajana and Janana composed by Bhima Bhoi are very popular among the village folk. As a front ranking revolutionary and reformer, he championed the cause of the downtrodden, helpless ones and challenged the prevailing ethos of the society. He had the vision of a casteless and classless society where would be no exploitation. Thus, the Mahima cult preaches universal brotherhood, non-violence, good neighbourliness, peaceful co-existence, and freedom from greed, kindness to all including birds, animals and insects. This cult of casteless puritanism attracted disciples from the tribal and the Schedule castes not only within Odisha but also from the regions adjoining Odisha, as far as Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. The Mahima Gadi or the religious seat of the Mahima Cult is

located at Joranda in the district of Dhenkanal. Spread over 100 acres, it consists of four temples-Gadi Mandira, Dhuni Mandira, Sunya Mandira and Niti Upasana Mandira. Of all the fairs and Festivals of Mahima cult, the most distinguished one “Magha Mela”, popularly known as Mahima Mela and Joranda Mela, is held in the month of Magha (Jan-Feb) for seven days. In conclusion it may be mentioned that Mahima Dharama is not just a religion but a reformation movement, a way of life and a code of conduct.

The 19th century was a period of renaissance in the history of Odisha. This age gave birth to many religious and reformation movements. Due to the introduction of English education, advent of the missionaries and the beginning of the vernacular press a new cultural epoch emerged. As a result in Bengal, Maharashtra and Odisha also witnessed the emergence of an elite class. These educated urban elites were forced to accept Brahmo faith as a reaction to the activities of the Christian missionaries. One such movement was Mahima Cult or Mahima Dharma. It had its origin and growth in Dhenkanal in the peasant community. This Mahima Dharma checked the process of mass conversion into Christianity. This indigenous cult brought a large number of uneducated rural people into its fold. Gradually this cult spread to the neighbouring states like Bengal, Assam Andhra Pradesh, Chhatisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. The founder of this new cult could not come to limelight and thus, the activities were shrouded in obscurity for a pretty long time. In course of time, this belief was changed and the philosophy and teachings of Mahima Gosain were understood in proper perspective.

The advent of Mahima Dharma, a religious movement of this time can bear the characteristics of other great nineteenth-century movements. However, the movements have an intimate link with the Odia tradition. The Brahmo and Arya Samaj movements used to reinterpret the Vedas to make Hinduism more suited to its newly modern and national adherents. While Mahima Dharma too reinterprets the scriptures regarding idolatry and polytheism a significant departure from the concurrent reform movements was its reference to a peculiar Odia tradition which has already expressed similar thoughts centuries before. Mahima Dharma is paradoxically an anti-traditional movement within the tradition.

The nineteenth century was marked by an upsurge of rational consciousness in all spheres of life. All the major religious movements of the time had an agenda of reconciling rationality with religion. It was the sixteenth century which had witnessed major religious renewal all over the world. Which had several common features despite occurring across countries and religions.

Firstly, the emergence of a new approach towards divinity which denounced cult and ritual worship and stated personal devotion to God to be the highest path to redemption. Secondly, this was a way equally open to all whatever their social or ritual status. Thirdly, religious doctrines began to be propagated through spoken regional languages instead of through sacred or esoteric languages like Sanskrit and Latin, which were by that time no longer understood by the masses. The period is marked by translations of sacred books into regional languages. Some of which are the German translation of the Bible by Luther, the Hindi Ramayana by Tulasidas, Odia Bhagabata by Jagannath Das. A vast new religious literature in the Odia languages also proliferated like the individual works of the Panchasakhas.

These three elements i.e. the direct approach to God, the idea of equality of men before god, the creation of a vast body of religious literature in regional languages is present almost in every religions. Christianity had its Reformation, Hinduism saw an outburst of regionally different theistic schools with their specific literature, Islam especially in India under Kabir produced an accumulation of mystic doctrines denouncing its formal rigidity as only means of redemption. In India these movement had two more common features. Firstly they greatly advanced the cause of theism and most of them were Vaishnava was particularly stressed on the personal communion between devotee and God. Secondly, they were priarily directed against archic tenents of Hinduism. Brahmanic heugemany was seriously questioned, as all souls were considered to be equal before God. Many of the works of this period were written by under privileged and low-caste people and low social condition was even praised as a special boon for devotion. Odisha being a land of Panchopasana Vishnu, Siva, Sakti, Surya and Ganesh familiar objects of worship with the coming of neo-vaishnavism Jagannath Das and Balaram Das etc propogated the concept of Sunya or Anakara, (Formlessness) and Alekh (having no form) Lord Krishna was identified with these concepts. Lord Krishna was described as the mani festation of Anakara Mandala (a void zone). Sarala Dasa in the Odia Mahabharat said much about this void, identifying it with Lord Jagannath. He may be therefore be founder of new cult of void as Alekha Dharma. Another exponent of Alekh cult was Chaitanya Das, the author of Nirguna Mahatmya.. He spoke in length the significance of Nirguna and devotion of Alekha as the world inside self. Balaram Das's "Virata Gita" explained the glory of formless Brahma got wide publicity in Odisha. The practice of taking shelter in Ashramas (Hermitages) also developed when poet Dwarika Das established his monastery at Rishbandh in Boud in 1690 A.D.. In his work Parache Gita he further explained Sunya Purusha concept with better clarity and boldness. In the begining of the 19th century the people of Odisha appeared to be ready for a change in their religious out look with the identification of Lord Krishna with Jagannath. The Jagannath cult adopted a new dimension. But the cult was steeped with superstition and orthodox belief.

A reform movement became inevitable to add new vigour to Hindu society. In Bengal the Brahma Samaj movement of Raja Rammohan Ray had already achieved. That Odisha begin in close proximity to Bengal could not escape the impact of the liberal movement under the spell of Brahma movement and Christianity a Hindu reform movement raised its head in Odia society. The Kujibar matha near Cuttack became widely known due to the preaching of one Sadhu named Sundar Das. He urged upon his disciples to reject idol worship. He had met some Christian missionaries and had read the Odia translation of Bible. He had also gone through Nistara Ratrakana (Ocean of Salvation). He was personally familiar with James Sutton and Lacey, two missionaries in Odisha. The missionaries were impressed with the spiritual knowledge of the Sadhu, but failed to convert him to Christianity. Sadhu Sundar Das accepted Vai shnavism and became a disciple of Alekha Gosain. Another person who popularised Alekha Cult was Chandramani Das, the author of Sudhakar Geeta. He has preached the importance of Bhakti Yoga. He has explained his concept of Sunya Purusha in the Sudhakara Geeta. In his openion Alekh emerged form the viod or Sunya.

Mahima Dharma is a special form of Odia Vaishnavism. Its principle tenets the worship of Sunya. The theory of Pinda Brahmanda and the idea of future of redeemer who would come and openly established what was for the time being. Mahima Dharma derived considerably from all these principles. The founder Mahima Dharma was Mahima or Alekha Gosain. Nothing about his parentage, place and date of birth is known.

The followers of the sect regard him as not born through any female organ (ayoni sambhuta) an incarnation of Mahima (Greatness) of Sunya Brahma (The great void). According to Satya Mahima Dharma, the founder of the Mahima cult was Yogeswara Baba. He had his first revelation at Puri in 1826. The Tahasildar of Angul had reported to the commissioner of Odisha in 1881 that Sadhu was known as Dhulia-Babajji (Dust clad Saint). He has matted his hair on his head and wore a saffron coloured lion cloth round his waist. He often sat in meditation and rarely spoke to a one. He was once invited to the Mukti mandapa Sabha in the Puri temple for a religious discourse. During the debate he established Brahma as unqualified Sachidananda. His disciples took him as the incarnation of God. He had been born as human being to establish the Satya Sanatana Dharma. They also believed that he was born out of Sunya. He was no ordinary human being. He was pure incarnation of Mahima (radiant glory) of Sunya anadi Brahma. The above tradition got circulated. The Tahasildar informed the commissioner that there was no authentic account about his origin, birth place and other antecedents. It appears that every thing about the founder was kept secret so as not to identify him with any group or caste or religion.

According to GA Grierson the followers of Mahima Cult were known as Alekhanamis. He says that the founder of the cult was one Mukunda Das who preached the religion in around 1850 A.D.. Mukunda Das had claimed for himself the incarnation of Alekha who was formless, omnipresent and omniscient, Grierson believed that he Guru died in 1857 after which the cult declined in popularity. It is known from a report of the chief commissioner of the central provinces that there is a peculiar sect of Hindu dissenters called the Kumbhipatias. The name of the founder of the religion is unknown and followers. State that he is a spiritual being who now lives in Heaven. His chief disciple Govinda Das is dead and another named Narasimha Das has entered his Matha in Banki. They have a book called Malika which contains predictions. They are divided into three seats the kumbhipatias, The Kanapatias, and the Ashritas.

MAHIMA GOSAIN first appeared at Puri in 1826 AD. The Mahima era (Mahimavda) starts from that date. Mahima Gosain lived on water only, for a twelve years around Puri Dhauligiri, Khandagiri, Udaya giri, Bhubaneswar etc. He was known as Nirahari Baba or Jalahari Baba. At Khandagiri, Dalai Bhakta supplied him with water. As a mandicant he drew the attention of the local people. He came to Kapilas after 12 years in 1838 (Mahimabda 12) and lived there for 24 years. After passing across pada padma mundia near Andharua close to Bhubaneswar now known as Prabhudha Vihara. There he gave up cloth kaupin and used the bark of the Kumbhi tree (Carex Arborea) as his lion cloth and assumed Ananta sayana and padmasana for 21 days in Atmayoga Samadhi. He spent 24 years in Kapilas, The first 12 years of which he lived on fruits and roots only and the remaining period on milk only. He

thus respectively as Falahari Gosain and Khirahari Gosain. Sadananda savara recognised him as the Lord of the universe and not Chandresekhara, the presiding deity of the hill and supplied him with fruits and roots and fuel for the anahuta dhuni (unextinguishable) heart daily. Raja Saheb Bhagirathi Mahindra Bahadur. Then the rulling chief of Dhenkna became disciple and arranged for the supply of milk in a new earthen pot every morning Brahma muhurta. He also denoted some land at Joranda for Mahima Gosain to build an Ashrama, that became the great centre of Mahima Cult. Mahima Gosain initiated one Jagannath known as Siddha Govinda Baba to head of the sixty four Siddha panthis in the first line. On instruction he proceeded to Boudh for the spread the Dharma. Mahima Gosain preached his new religion known as Satya Mahima or Alekha in different feudatory states. A number of tribal and lower caste people became his disciple. He setup a number Matha, Ashrams and Tungis during the period Joranda in Dhenkanal district became the Principal monastery of the sect. After having completed these three stages of secluded life, which in a way marked the process of his incarnation through his gradual acceptance of earthly food, Mahima Swami converted the earth goddess, Annapurna and accepted the meal of cooked rice from her. Thus having in a way converted the gods he set out, accompanied by his disciple Jagannath (Vasudeva) to convert the men.

The famous saint poet Bhima Bhoi was born of obscure parentage in the middle of 19th century. He was founded deserted in a palm grove outside the village Jatasingha and was adopted by a khand couple Danara and Gurubari. Danara died shortly after that the young Gurubari had to marry again the brother of her deceased husband. He was Dhaneswar an agricultural labourer in the village Kandhara near Rairakhol Gurubari shifted to her new home at Kandhara with the boy Bhima. Very soom she became the mother of two children and Bhima was then subjected to step motherly treatment. The blind and neglected boy suffered unfold misery early childhood which he poignantly recollects in his “ Stuti Chintamani”. While a boy of four he could see a wandering yogi with the signs of Sankha and Chakra and discuss in two arms, begging alms in that village. This was probable one of the visions of the childhood days of the blind Bhima about his Guru MAHIMA GOSAIN. When life became unbearable the helpless boy left home at the tender age of seven and began to earn living by begging food. At the age of twelve we find him as a cow hard tending cattle we find him as a cowherd tending cattle of Chaitanya pradhan a rich cultivator in the village of Kankanapada.

It is said that one evening he accidently fell into a well and remained there in for long three days. These were the trying days for him and without thinking of any means of rescue he spent these days in deep meditation. It was the close of the year 1862 and Mahima Gosain was then passing through the village Kankanapada found the blind devotee inside the well and rescued him from that dark pit. Bhima Bhoi instantly got converted into Mahima faith which brought about great transformation in him and in the pursuit of his life. The astonishing success of Mahima Dharma which at the end of nineteenth century spread across the Mahanadi area from cuttack to Sambalpur is due a considerable degree to the world of Bhima Bhoi. Though he lived in the nineteenth century, he may be called the last medieval poet of Odisha. As he took up and continued the tradition of medieval Vaishnavism.

Like the Panchasakha's he wrote bhajanas (divotional songs) and dialogues between gods and saints in the style of puranas. In Nirvedasadhana he narrates the dialogue between Mahima swain and Jagannath-Vasudeva through which the tenets of the new doctrine are explained. He also took up the Malika tradition composing new ones which are now as well known and famous in rural Odisha as those of the Panchasakha's. It was Bhima Bhoi who depicted Mahima Swain as the coming true of medieval predictions and this is now widely believed all over Odisha. But Bhima Bhoi not only described the coming of Mahima Swami in the term of the older scriptures, he also predicted his return in the future. In his malikas, he says that the definite end of the Kaliyuga Mahima Swami will come again, and then only the true bhaktas, that is the follower of Mahima Dharma, whose names are listed by Bhima would be saved. Bhima Bhoi's works rooted the teachings of Mahima Swami with in Odia medieval tradition, there by changing and influencing this very tradition. Further, in his later years Bhima Bhoi seems in a certain degree to have outgrown Mahima Dharma and to have found a tradition of his own.

In the year 1876 Mahima Gosain breathed his last at Madhi Modern (Kamaksha nagar). He was given Samadhi on the 10th day of the bright fort night of Falguna at Joranda. According to his believers he did not die but entered a Samadhi (a statue of intense meditation). This happened at Joranda in 1876 and soon three temples were built in Joranda. Near the place where Swami attained Samadhi. Temples without any images. These are the Sunnya Mandira, the Dhuni Mandira, and the Gadi Mandira. Joranda developed into an important centre of Mahima Dharma, where guru purnima, the day of his Samadhi, thousands of pilgrims gather. The death of Mahima Gosain gave a great shock to Bhima Bhoi who used to look upon him as the anthropomorphic form of sunya brahma. He was attended the council that was summoned at Joranda immediately after the death of Mahima Gosain for consolidation of the Mahima Cult. But not being satisfied with the deliberation of the council he made up his mind to organise another monastic institute after his own idealism. From Joranda he came to khaliapali on the bank of the Anga river and decided to make that picturesque village the seat of his religious activities. Maharaja Niladhara Singh of Sonapur who had great respect for Bhima Bhoi was glad to allow the monastery to be built his territory. Thus Khaliapali Ashrama came into being in 1877 and rapidly developed as a notable centre of religion and culture under the care and supervision of Sri Ma Annapurna. Bhima Bhoi in Khaliapali did not live the life of a sanyasi. His monastery was a seat of experiment for achieving the synthesis between life spiritual and life temporal. Annapurna his spiritual consort was a sanyasini in strict sense of the term and was living a life of austerity and moral purity. She was great spiritual force in the Ashrama. Besides her there were four other consorts of Bhima Bhoi two of whom were regarded as his spiritual saktis and other two as his worldly companions. In 1892 Bhima Bhoi begat a son and a daughter with his wives. Bhima Bhoi himself died in 1895 at forty six years of age. His female consorts survived for some time and passed away one after the other during the first quarter of 20th century. In 1935-36 a Samadhi Mandira was constructed in honour of each member of this divine family But prophet Bhima Bhoi and Srma Annapurna have been given Samadhi in same temple.

The Mahima Dharma gained popularity during 1863 to 1867. It was most popular in Dhenkanal and Puri districts, A few Ashramas were set up. By 1865 as many as twenty one Tungis had been built. These were mostly in Angul, Banki, Dhenkanal and Hindol, Mahima Gosain, himself moved from village to village preaching his cult. It was most popular among the peasant community. two of his disciples called Govinda Das and Narasimha Das were creating a good impact on the people by performing miracles. Mahima Gosain was however, not in favour of miracles. He laid emphasis on the practice of truth, nonviolence, and purity of conduct. He himself practised compassion and forgiveness. He preached his faith with a missionary cult. He drove away the mahimaitee from his estate. This Bahmans of Jajpur were also opposed to the cult. The adopted social ostracism against Mahimaites. They tried to turture some devotees. But mahimaties. They tried to torture some devoteas. But mahima aites accepted the challenge with tolerance. They could succeed in overcoming the difficulty. In course of time Mahima Cult could stabilise its position. The followers remained firm with their conviction . They organised themself better to withstand any offensive by the orthodox Brahmas. The patronage of Raja Mahindra Bahadur was great help to them in their fight for survival. The Mahimaites held large congregation to make an impact. They also evolved a code of conduct for discipline in the cult.

The Mahima Cult had a philosophy of its own. It centred around the concept of one God. The central concept of Mahima Dharma is Sunya Parama Brahma characterised by such attributes as Alekha (Indiscricable), Nirguna (without qualities), Nirakar (without form), Anadi (begining less), Niranjana (No impurities) etc. The idea of Sunya (Void or emptiness) is a Vedantie docterine. Sunya samadhi is the is the heighest stage of yoga. The Buddhist of Sahajiya yana have developed Sunyavada. The Mahima religin appears to have taken the concept from the Natha sect. which has exerted decisive the influence on the history of Odisha' religion .The Pinda-Brahmanda (Creation of microcosmos with macrocosmos) popularised by the Panchasakhas has its influence on the Mahima religion. The understanding of its of it is known as Brahma Jana. It lies hidden in the Vedas . It needs no scriptures or preceptor (Guru) to reveal itself . The real preceptor is the invisible, indescriable ,Alekha or Sunya Brahma. The salvation (Moksha), constitutes the reunion of the soul (pinda) with Sunya Brahma (Brahmanda) through nirguna bhakti. No act of worship is required , no image, no external rite is required to attain Sunyata . It can be achived through a meditative path. The teachings of Bhima Bhoi are akin to those of the Panchasakha's . He like them believed in Malika Prophetic literature and believes that the Kaliyuga would terminate when the tenth incarnation Kalki will manifest himself as Niranjana and destroy the present creation to create the new age, satya yuga. Viswanath Baba, on the other hand, stresses that Mahima Gosain is not an incarnation but the Isnana purushal form (swarupa). He is identical with mahima, stands above all other Israras i.e. Gods. Viswanath Baba acknowledges sruti and smruti as authentic (Pramana). Guru-ajna (command of the preceptor) can surpass all of them.

A number of ethical disciplines are to be observed by the believers of the Mahima order. The important of the ethical commandments are:-

To follow the path of ahimsa

God is formless and all pervasive; it is not possible to make his idol, He is the Supreme Being.

Do not believe in caste system everyone is equal before God

. There is only one God i.e. Alekha Parama Brahma. He is shapeless and Formless. The universe is the creation of his mahima.

Offering the oblation to deseased ancestors and funeral rites are superstitious.

Mahima Swami should not be regarded as the incarnation of God.

Utter the name of Alekha take shelter in nihilism.

Mahima Dharma accepts other religions with respect.

The disciples should not have any house hold attachment.

The followers of Mahima should regard other people as brothers and fellow beings.

The supermen lord should be worshipped in the morning before the sunrise and in the evening before sunset.

No food should be taken after sunset.

Mahimaites will take cooked rice only once a day.

They should take shelter in a house outside and away from the village.

The monks and nuns are not allowed to travel together in preaching the cult.

The Babas to present a simple and clear view free of any confusion.

No food to be taken from rich people's houses.

External rituals like pilgrimage or ceremonies as means of acquiring religious merit should be abandoned.

Service to humanity must be given first priority.

The cult aims at uplifting the down trodden of the society.

The Mahima Dharma initially started as a social-spiritual renaissance movement. Both revolutionary and humanistic in the nineteenth century within the boundary of the state has now spread to the country particularly in neighbouring states such Andhrapradesh, Chhatishgarh, Madhyapradesh, Jharkand, Bihar, West Bengal and Assam. Authoritative texts in Itihas, Darshan, Bhajans, Stutis etc. have been translated into Telgu, Hindi, Bengali,

English etc. Thus the Mahima Dharma has spread beyond the boundary of the country and is available in USA, UK and Germany also.

The Mahima Dharma advocated belief in an all powerful, all pervasive, formless and indescribable Absolute who had created the world out of his Mahima and who was accessible to all through bhakti (devotion). Mahima Dharma was open to all but vast majority of its adherents came from marginal, mostly untouchable, caste and tribal groups. Mahima Dharma raised voice against the caste system. It never distinguished between men and women, higher caste and lower caste, rich and poor and so on. The wise men never differentiate among the people. So Mahima Dharma never put any restriction for worship of Lord. Only through devotion, God can be attained. Everyone is competent to worship Lord and attain him. The basic aim of the Mahima Dharma is to establishment of casteless and classless society. Bhima Bhoi write “ Jehu echha sehu namaku Bhajile ethi kichi dosa nahin ki aba stiri se ki purusha je jana pariba dhyaya Atma bhagatire dosadosa nahin nicha uchha sabu sama. Bhane Bhima Bhoi Gurupada dhyayi nirguna a namabrahma” “ No harm if any on chant the name of Lord Every man and women can pray him Brahman never distinguished between high and low, Bhima, Thus suggests to chant the name of Nirguna Brahma. Thus, caste system was opposed tooth and nail by the followers and preachers of Mahima Dharma.

Mahima Gosain by his long missionary career had laid down strong foundation for his new cult. He had propagated this new cult only in the coastal districts but also in the hilly tracts of Garjata of Odisha. He had profound influence on the people of neighbouring provinces. Many ashrams were established on the patronage of the ruling chiefs of Odisha. The important ashrama of the cult in western Odisha was established by philosopher-poet Bhima Bhoi at Khaliapali. The devotional songs of Bhima Bhoi helped much to popularize the new cult among the common people of Odisha. By the second half of 19th century Mahima Cult grew into a popular religion in Odisha which could counteract the movement of Christian’s missionaries and anglicized Brahma movement. Mahima Cult generated a ray of hope among the millions of Hindus who could aspire to find salvation in their own tradition system but in a simple way. In this process there was no fear of any rituals and predominance of the priests.

The philosophy of Mahima Cult is not in compatible to the teachings of Vedas and Upanishad. The authenticity of Veda was not rejected by Mahima dharma. It made attempt to reform Hinduism from within Mahima Gosain vehemently criticized idolatry and caste system and tried his most to remove the remote possibilities of idol worship. In this process, he declared that worship is due only to Guru who is Param brahma but not to any individual Mahima dharma discouraged caste system and allowed inter-dining system. He disallowed his disciples to worship him. Thus he strongly rejected the evils of the society.

In the caste ridden society of Odisha in 19th century, Mahima Dharma emerged as a revolutionary cult which said that all men and women could take refuge in Alekha Pram Brahma. The aim and objective of Mahima Dharma to liberate the downtrodden men and women from bondage of caste, superstition beliefs and tradition, ritualistic idolatry and predominance the priests could be materialized into action in Odisha. The idea of one Godhood seems to be ideal which he propounded thus brought about tremendous influence in

the religious social and cultural life of the people. any individual Mahima dharma discouraged caste system and allowed inter-dining system. He disallowed his disciples to worship him. Thus he strongly rejected the evils of the society.

Contribution of Mahima Literature Bhima Bhoi, the illiterate, blind and aboriginal khand may unquestionable rank among the great poets of Odia. Literature in the 19th century A.D. In fact the mahika dharma would not have attained even half of its popularity in Odisha without inspiring appeal of this great literary genius. Large number of his works found at present in moth eaten manuscript form and scattered fragments of his songs can be heard through innumerable lips throughout Odisha. The Prachi Samiti rendered valuable service to the cause of Mahima religion by publishing some of the works of the great prophet. The most famous of which are the Stuti chintamani, the srutini sedha Gita, The Brahmanirapama Gita, the Adyanta Gita, The Ashtaka Bihrigita, Chantisa Madhuchakra, Bhajanamalas and Mahima bhajana, Prabhata Avakasha, Bangala atha Bhajana, Nirveda sadana etc. Sri Viswanath Baba also write the history of Mahima dharma namely mahima dharma pratipadaka (Vol-I & II) SATYA MAHIMA DHARMA Itihasa and srinad chintmaya Brahma Geeta. These Mahima literature are the greatest contribution to enrich the odia literature.

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- dharyati 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-puranic 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 puranic conception dualistic theism. Similarly, the Buddhist theory of Sunyavada was replaces 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-pauranic 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 downtrodden 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'. (StutiChintamani, 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.

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