

**MAHIMA DHARMA: A SOCIO-CULTURAL
PROTEST MOVEMENT IN
19th CENTURY ORISSA**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation "MAHIMA DHARMA: A SOCIO-CULTURAL PROTEST MOVEMENT IN 19th CENTURY ORISSA" submitted by Priyadarshi Kar in partial fulfilment for the award of the degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY of this university is his own work. This dissertation has not been previously submitted for the award of any other degree to this university or any other university. To the best of our knowledge this is a bonafide work.

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*Dedicated to ...
My Mother*

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Priyadarshi Kar

CHAPTER - I
INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

In the nineteenth century, movement for social mobility, particularly against the Brahmanical models of Hindu society, were more or less witnessed all over the country with regional variations on strategies and approaches. The system in which these movements operated, had undergone of rapid and dramatic changes. The chief of these changes was the defeat and disposition of the regional and local powers.

The establishment of colonial state marked important changes in the field of education and learning. The expansion of education and the removal of caste qualifications for attaining it made it possible for small numbers of lower caste people to acquire education. These lower caste men became leaders of anti-Brahmanical movements later. This explanation mostly attributed the genesis of social protest movement to the exogenous factors.¹

However recent studies have revealed that there have been a number of social protest movements from 'within the tradition'. The Satnami, Appapanthi and Sivanarayan sects in Uttar Pradesh, Virabharna in Andhra Pradesh, Kartha Bajas and Balramis in Bengal, the Charandasis in Rajasthan can be mentioned as few examples.² Although these autochthonous reform movements were limited to local and regional situations, they provided significant insight into the weaknesses and discontentments against the dominant traditions. Hinduism which was beset with caste distinctions, idolatry, polytheism and a host of other superstitions were denounced by these sects. These heterodox sects had their own methods of organization and functioning and had a significant social base in their respective localities.

¹ For details see: Halon, O', Raosalind, "Caste Conflict and Ideogy" CUP, London, 1985.

² Raghuvanshi, V.P.S. "Indian Society in the Eighteenth Century", 1969, 143-146.

The notion of the genesis and development of modern ideas in reform movements in the 19th century in India was 'exclusively' due to the introduction of western ideas, institutions and education seems to be exaggerated. This explicitly manifested in almost all of the writings of British administrative historians and also some early Indian historians. The British colonial and administrative historians in their writings tried to justify the 'British rule' in India.

They characterised the 18th century as "dark age". They argued that the western ideas of liberty, rationalism, humanism and secularism etc. acted as the "open sesame" which made the Indian intellectuals critical of their own institutions that consequently led them to embark upon a career of reform and regeneration of Indian society.

In the light recent researches carried in this field it appears that though western education and ideas did play a significant and crucial role in this process of regeneration of Indian society, there were potentialities for social development and modernisation of India, in the pre-colonial Indian tradition.

Thus says, Prof. K.N. Panikkar,

Without belittling the importance of western influence, it should be pointed out that this analysis not only misses the complexities of the social and intellectual developments during the nineteenth century but also over looks the elements of protest and dissent in the Indian intellectual tradition and the potentialities of social development in the 18th century before the intervention of the British. Above all it totally ignores the material conditions within which these developments occurred.³

Thus we can not ignore these 'progressive trends' within the Indian intellectual milieu in the 18th and 19th centuries. The social significance of these indigenous sects needs to be critically evaluated in a proper historical perspective.

³ Panikkar, K.N., "Presidential address", Indian History congress, 36th session, JNU, New Delhi, 1975, p.3.

They need to be assessed and understood primarily as an expression of 'a developing trend of protest and dissent in the religious life of people characterized at time by superstitions and the tyranny of the priests'. They testify to the reform movements manifesting in society independently of foreign influence'.⁴

In this dissertation I have tried to analyse, Mahima Dharma - an autochthonous Hindu reform movement in nineteenth century Orissa. Like the above mentioned sects in other parts of India, Mahima Dharma emerged in 19th century Orissa which turned against the Jagannath worship in particular which represented the orthodox brahmanical order. Unlike the 'neo-Hindu' reform movements, as for instance the Brahmo Samaj, which came into being as a sequel to the encounter with Christianity and the philosophies of the West and obtained from there, (i.e., from outside) the criteria of their criticism of its own tradition, no intrinsic direct western influence in the emergence of Mahima Dharma can be traced. On the contrary, this movement derives its criticism of the Hindu tradition directly from the traditions itself. Thus it stood in an almost paradoxical twofold relation to the tradition which it accepts on the one hand, and rejects on others.⁵

This two fold relation to the tradition is made possible by its distinctive diversity and traces back especially to two characteristic features.:

- A. The constant dialogue of the so called "great tradition" - the religion of Brahmins as portrayed in Sanskrit texts - with the tribal religions which in constantly changing process, are often Hinduized and partly rejected again.

⁴ Ibid, p.4.

⁵ Eschmann, A: 'Mahima Dharma': An Autochthonous Hindu Reform movement in', A Eschmann, H. Kulke, G.C. Tripathy (ed) "The cult of Jagannath and the regional tradition of Orissa", Monohar, Delhi, 1978, p-375.

B. The fact that in course of its history, Hinduism has often brought forth heterodox movements of the most divergent nature, rejected them in the first place, but in most cases, advanced their teachings later and integrated them in the mainstream of tradition.⁶

A critical analysis of Mahima Dharma is therefore meaningful only in the context of its relationship and dialogue with the orthodox Jagannath tradition.

Couched in the religious and moral ideas Mahima Dharma, a socio-cultural protest movement in early nineteenth century Orissa, generated ritualistic practices and beliefs that stood opposed to the dominant Jagannath Cult. It regarded itself as a counter as well as a succession movement' to the Jagannath cult. It aimed at purging the increasing ritual orthodoxy in the worship of Jagannath. The notions of anti-idol worship, anti-caste and concept of equality among all were the central themes of the sect's philosophy.

The anti-idol worship concept in Mahima Philosophy had a definite significance. This notion not only emphasised the worship of 'Brahma' and formless (nirguna) god but also ruled out any medium or priesthood (of the Brahmins) in worshipping god.⁷

The other conception which support Mahima Dharma ideological intervention in the power structure of society are : the concept of 'one God', the notion of Kaliyuga, and Kalki-Avatar etc. The sect applies all these concepts to denounce the practices of the dominant tradition sustained by the Brahmanical model of social

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Das, S. "Mahima Dharma: A Cultural Dissent" Arya Prakashan, Cuttack, 1997, p.4.

relationship. An attempt to transform the authority system and power structure is evident in the moral and religious ideals of Mahima Dharma.

Mahima Dharma rejected the caste system out rightly based on the notion of "purity-impurity" and believed in the principles of equality. It perceived the structural weaknesses in the system which assures Brahminical authority. It challenged the authority of religious literature (Vedas and Upanisads) and power derived from the selective access to it by the Brahmins. The sect argued that Vedas provide only a partial explanation of the cosmology and do not deal with the highest authority. On the contrary, Mahima Dharma claims that it is a creation of the "Anadi" (Supreme) from whom all the Hindu gods have derived their existence. This idea put forward by the polemicians of Mahima Dharma helped them to reject the dominant tradition and offer ideological support to their own values.⁸

My approach to the understanding and analysis of Mahima Dharma will be based on an interpretative method. An analysis of 'common sense' used by A. Gramsci (Prison Notebook) will help us in studying Mahima Dharma. According to Gramsci,

an ordinary individual has two theoretical consciousness (or one contradictory consciousness): One which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world. The other superficially explicit and verbal which he has inherited from the past and uncritically observed. This consciousness is thus, contradictory, fragmented, held together in more or less haphazard whole. It is formed and transformed in the course of a historical process which brings dominant and subordinate classes into relations with each others.⁹

Common sense, therefore, is the contradictory unity of two opposed elements : one the autonomous which express the common understanding of the members of a subaltern group and the second element which is borrowed from the dominant

⁸ Ibid., p.3.

⁹ Gramsci, Antonio, "Selection from the prison Notebook, New York 1975, p. 333.

classes and which expresses the fact of the ideological submission of the subaltern groups.¹⁰

The specific combination of these two elements is not fixed, it changes in the course of the historical process of relation between dominant and subordinate groups. On the one hand, the emergence of new philosophies and religions which acquire a dominant position in society will have its impact through the 'borrowed elements in common sense'. On the other hand, the emergence of new religions and new systems of philosophy is also not unrelated to the process of struggle between dominant and subordinate groups. The autonomous elements in common sense erupts precisely at the moment of heightened conflicts between classes and at such moments the crisis of society is expressed in the threat of rupture of the community into two opposed faiths, two opposed religions, two opposed views of the world.¹¹

Hence my task would be to extract from the immediate reality of the sect, the 'contradictory consciousness' of the subaltern mind. Analysing the beliefs and practices of Mahima Dharma I shall try to derive the implicit elements which stand in opposition to the dominant form.

With the colonial intervention the nineteenth century Indian society was subjected to pressure from two accounts. Firstly it was the external influence of the Christian missionaries and secondly a long fostered urge, among the non-Brahmins to find an alternative order, that would recognise them at par with the Brahmins. These two factors helped to question the efficacy of the existing institutions. The social practices and religious beliefs prevalent in the 19th century acted as

¹⁰ Chatterjee, Partha, "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness" in "Subaltern Studies", vol.IV, Delhi, 1990, p.170.

¹¹ Ibid, p.171.

impediments to progress was a conviction common to all nineteenth century intellectuals. These practices and beliefs of 19th century India were seen as the features of a decadent society and they were sought to be replaced by freedom, faith, reason, toleration and sense of human dignity.

Let us make a brief analysis of the history of 19th century Orissa and try to perceive the roots of emergence of Mahima Dharma. The British occupied Orissa in 1803 and since then there began a long period of social and economic changes. The Oriyas were relatively conservative in social life. The Brahmins predominated in social organisation. Hunter had noted that the people of Orissa were a 'Priest-ridden' race kept in subjection by the Brahmins and subject to all paralysing influences of religious superstitions and caste prejudices. Nowhere else do the caste rules exercise such an influence.¹²

The social system in Orissa underwent vast changes due to the introduction of new system of land revenue settlements. The introduction of Permanent Settlement in certain areas created a class of new officials who survived and thrived on the exploitation of poor cultivators. There came a clear cut social separation between the land revenue officials and tillers and this was of 'fundamental social consequence'.¹³ The Bengali land holders depended on certain local officials who widened the social difference between the rich and the poor. Within 13 years of the East India company's administration there broke out the Paik Rebellion (1817), a clear sign of discontentment of the people of Orissa against the early British socio-economic policies. Orissa was singularly neglected and the administrative changes initiated by the British destroyed the infrastructure of economic development in Orissa as a result

¹² Hunter, W.W., "Orissa", pp. 10-11.

¹³ "The Imperial Gazetteer of India", vol. III. p.226

of which many skilled workers were thrown into unemployment. The introduction of 'temporary settlements' from 1804 to 1837 brought untold misery and sufferings to the people. It could not provide adequate safeguards to poor tenants and cultivators from the oppression of the Zamindars.

The British colonial policies which failed to arrest the trend to pauperization actually consolidated the process of upper caste domination in the society. Most of the Zamindars were Brahmins or Karans although the Khandayats improved their relative economic position. In the urban centres, opportunities were almost entirely monopolised by the Brahmins and Karans. The factors promoting political and economic dominance of the upper castes had their roots in the cultural hegemony. The colonial state which brought a change at political level did nothing to alter the structure of dominance. Nevertheless the transfer of power from the natives to the foreigners helped in the growth of an aspiration particularly within the subordinate strata to break the cultural order that has so long been the cause of their lower social status and backwardness. Economic pauperization due to Famine (1866) and modern capitalist oriented development accentuated the feeling of protest to surface.

The upper caste domination was not only sustained by the political economic process in the 19th century Orissa but also by a cultural hegemony which had effectively contained all alternative value movements. At the centre of this hegemonic system lies the Jagannath cult.¹⁴ The King initially appropriated this tribal God (Jagannath) and with the help of Brahmin priests and Karan managers build up an elaborate network of rituals complete with art, music, congregation and cycle of

¹⁴ Mohanty, Monoranjan, 'Caste, class, dominance in Orissa' in Frankel and Rao (ed.) 'Dominance and state power in modern India', Vol.II, OUP, (Delhi, 1989), p.356.

festivities. The Hinduization of tribal deities was an important part of the process of legitimation of royal power.¹⁵

The king of Puri made the Jagannath Temple the centre of his rituals. After the visit of Sankaracharya to Puri in the 9th century and the establishment of his Math, Puri was integrated with subcontinental network of Hindu pilgrimage. Once the temple was built the famous Bhakti poet like Ramanuja and Jayadeva spent many years in Puri in the 12th century. The climax of Vaishnavism in this region reached in the 16th century with the coming of Sri Chaitanya to Puri where he launched a mass movement for a popular religion. His Vaishnavism cut across caste lines and dispensed with priests and rituals. He propagated devotional songs in the local language and made divine love the only religious ideal. Thus it carried within it the seeds of 'anti-Brahminism'. The Panchasakhas (medieval school of 'Five Friends') in their writings in the 15th and 16th century too carried the element of social protest in Orissa. They expounded the cause of the lower caste people. The Panchasakhas spearheaded the protest at a time when the Brahminical pretensions were at their apex.¹⁶ The Panchasakhas has endeavoured to abolish all barriers of caste and creed and other man-made social institutions and distinctions. In this attempts they echoed, Kabir, Nanak, Shankar Dev and Jhanadev, Narsi Mehta¹⁷. The Panchasakhas through their numerous writings accelerated the scope and dimensions of social protest.

¹⁵ Eschmann. A. The Cult of Jagannath", Manohar Delhi, 1978, p.388.

¹⁶ Mishra, Baba, 'Medieval Orissa and the cult of Jagannath, Navranga', New Delhi, 1992, p.174.

¹⁷ Das, Chittarentjan, "Balram Das", Sahithya Academy, Bhubaneswar, 1982, p.32.

However in due course of time by 19th century the "Jagannath cult" became associated with the dominant classes and castes. In the exercise of cultural and ideological hegemony the Jagannath cult proved to be a handy tool for the ruling forces in Orissa, even though Jagannath originated as a tribal God. Kings and chiefs of inland Orissa adopted the Jagannath system or comparable ritual systems to legitimise their power¹⁸.

In the 19th century there were few attempts to provide an alternative to Brahmanism and Jagannath cult in particular. Firstly, it was the missionaries with the support of the colonial state tried for evangelization of Orissa. Their criticism came as early as 1806, when Rev. Buchanon, wrote a narrative titled "Atrocities at Jagannath". He described Jagannath as the 'blood-seeking God of the east' and cited an exaggerated number of cases of self-immolation under the wheels of the car of Jagannath', He suggested the formation of a Christian institution to undermine the wide and extended empire of Jagannath. Subsequently a number of attempts were made by the missionaries to spread Christianity and to condemn idol worship (of Jagannath) and superstitions associated with it. The very basis of Hinduism was challenged and attempts were made to prove that 'the Hindu religion and Philosophy was detrimental' to the development of the masses.

The chief propaganda machinery of the missionaries were the introduction of 'education. The missionary activities stuck at the root of the Brahmin conservatism. Withdrawal of secular support to the Brahmanical ideas made the task of the missionaries easier to spread their message among the masses. They certainly created a new atmosphere and roused the people to face new realities. They claimed to

¹⁸ Mohanty, M, "Arguing with Bailey by Proxy" Social Science Probings, June, 1985, p.266.

represent a superior culture and with characteristic missionary zeal criticised all native institutions.¹⁹

However the early christian converts formed a small exclusive community without much social influence and leadership. For the missionaries in Orissa, the area of operation was also limited. In the princely states, where the British regulations and laws were not in force, the missionaries could not carry on any effective work for a long time. Other factors like the lack of good communication and transport facilities, rigidity of social customs, slow growth of English education, rigours of old traditions hindered the missionaries to make much headway in Orissa.²⁰

The change of missionaries effort in dismantling the Orthodoxy was felt not so much in the number of conversion as the upsurge of indigenous reform movements such as - the "Kujibara Matha" and the "Mahima Dharma". Both these indigenous movements carried the similar ideas of 'anti-Brahmanism'.

Kujibara Matha was founded by Sadhu Sundar Das. He hailed from Athagarh and was the commander of the forces of the Raja of Athagarh. He later renounced the world and established an Ashram at Kujibar near Chaudwar. The Sadhu expounded the principle of non-violence and accepted disciples regardless of caste distinctions. He circulated a manuscript weekly on palm leaf named 'Kujibara Patra' in which he discussed religious social and even administrative issues. He did not believe in traditional Hindu religion dominated by the orthodox Brahmins.

The missionaries met Sadhu Sunder Das and his disciples in 1826. Some of the Sadhu's disciples developed much interest in the Christian Pamphlets and later embraced Christianity. This led to friction between Sadhu Sundar Das and the

¹⁹ Patra, K.M. "An Advanced History of Modern Orissa", Delhi, 1982,p.52.

²⁰ Ibid., p.69.

missionaries. He criticised the missionaries for adopting all kinds of devices to convert the Hindus.²¹

Thus this was the backdrop in which Mahima Dharma emerged. An element of protest and dissent did exist in the indigenous traditional cultural milieu in Orissa which had their seeds in the "Bhakti" and "Panchasakha" movements in the medieval times. In the changing scenario on the 19th century these elements of social protest and religious dissent surfaced and assumed new dimension and expressed itself in the form of socio-cultural movements like Mahima Dharma.

My basic assumptions in this work are the following.

1. Mahima Dharma was an indigenous social-cultural protest movement in 19th century Orissa which rose against the Brahamical Hindu society in general and the Jagannath cult in particular.
2. Mahima Dharma emerged from the socio-economic and cultural formations of pre-colonial Orissa and a tradition of dissent and protest did exist which manifested itself in the practices of the sect.
3. The notions of anti-caste, anti-idol worship and the principles of equality were central themes of the Dharma.
4. The sect tried to established an alternative social and moral order to the Jagannath cult.
5. For the construction of an alternative order the sect appropriated some symbols, myths and practices of the popular traditions and reinterpreted them in the context of the sect's own vision of life and society.

²¹ Mohanty, M. op.cit. p.460.

However the main problem one faces while making a critical narrative on Mahima Dharma is the non-availability of adequate literature. Whatever literature has been published by the sect, its followers and sympathisers to my mind do not have strong historical basis. Most of the works deal with either its philosophy or 'controversies'. Only a few works have tried to interpret the sect's history and philosophy with proper historical sources and perspective.

The chapter on the historiography of the sect basically deals with the 'controversies' and debates regarding a) The identify of the Founder (Mahima Swami), b) The nature and characterisation of the sect. Along with this, a brief description of the historical growth of sect would also be presented. While writing the historiography I have tried to simply state the opinions of various scholars on these two themes and draw out their implications.

The next chapter deals with the organisation and spread of Mahima Dharma. In this chapter, the basic divisions among the followers of the sect, their social and religious customs, basic tenets, places of worship and major centres of the sect shall also be discussed.

The last chapter has focused on the ideology of Mahima Movement, reflecting its social and moral vision. This seems to be an uphill task. I have tried to interpret some of the works of Biswanath Baba (who wrote extensively on Mahima Dharma in the 20th century) and the works of Bhima Bhoi (the poet laureate of Mahima Dharma) to construct its ideology and reveal their objectives. These poems though appear to be simple and with religious overtones written in the typical medieval Panchasakha style, a critical analysis reveals the "contradictory consciousness" of the subaltern mind.

CHAPTER - II
HISTORIOGRAPHY OF
MAHIMA DHARMA

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MAHIMA DHARMA

Mahima Dharma until now has unfortunately escaped serious academic interest. Most of the narratives offered by scholars and writers on Mahima Dharma seem to have a very thin historical basis. Among the various issues discussed in these works, the two most crucial are (a) the controversy regarding the original identity of the founder of the sect (Mahima Swami) (b) the characterisation of the sect. These two issues seem to dominate the writings of almost all the works on Mahima Dharma.

This chapter would seek to analyse these two issues and focus on searching of the historical elements ensuing the upsurge of the sect and its subsequent growth till today.

The reasons for the first publication on the Mahima Dharma was the spectacular attempt by few followers of the sect to force their way into the temple of Jagannath in Puri to take the statue of Jagannath and burn it in 1881. The very next year, a short report of the "Commissioner of Orissa Division" appeared in the "Proceedings of the Asiatic society of Bengal"¹ which gave a fairly good account of the sect. This report forms the basis for further references made about Mahima Dharma afterwards in the District Gazetteer of Sambalpur, in the census, as well as

¹ "On the Origin and Growth of the sect of the 'Hindu Dissenters' who profess to be the followers of Alekh. Proceedings of Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1882, pp.2-6.

by C.E. Buckland in "Bengal under the Lieutenant Governors".² While the first report called the followers of the sect of "Hindu dissenters" and therewith aptly characterised its peculiar relationship with the Hindu tradition, there appeared two version in 1911 in which an attempt was made to establish the 'neo-Hindu origin' and character of Mahima Dharma. In B.C.Mazumdar's book "Sonepur in the Sambalpur Tract"³ written on orders from the Raja of Sonepur in order to represent his rank and rights in relation to the British at the Royal Darbar in Delhi, an appendix is devoted to Mahima Dharma. The portrayal furnishes a useful source since it depicts the customs and dissemination of the movement in Sambalpur between 1890 and 1911. However, it does not go beyond this account and confines itself to connect the doctrines of the sect with Digambar Jainism in a very general way.

Again in 1911, Nagendra Nath Vasu published his article on Mahima Dharma.⁴ Vasu tried to establish an apparent connection between the doctrines of Mahima Dharma which the tribal religions on the one hand and the medieval school of "Five Friends" on the other. There are a couple of writings on this theme of exploring any previous lineage of Mahima Dharma with any other religious movements of medieval Orissa. However, these few works serves very little purpose in understanding the socio-political role of the movement. Also the relation

² Buckland, C.E. "Bengal under the Lieutenant Governors" Calcutta, 1901, vol.II, p. 733-735.

³ Mazumdar, B.C., Calcutta, 1911, App IV, p.126-136.

⁴ Vasu, N.N., "The Modern Buddhism and its followers in Orissa", Calcutta 1911, The Archaeological Survey of Mayurbhanj, Calcutta, 1911, p. CI XLV-CCCXIII.

between the sect and the individual in the socio-economic and political context does not find a place in these writings

The next major work on Mahima Dharma were produced by Prof. Chittaranjan Das. A long article by him, "Studies in medieval Religion and literature in Orissa" appeared in 1951. This article presented a brief summary of the principal teachings of Mahima Dharma. His book "Odisare Mahima Dharma"⁵ in Oriya, is the first attempt towards a complete survey that restored the historical tradition, legends and doctrines and strove after portraying the conformity between the origin and development of Mahima Dharma Movement and religions of the humanity on the whole. Prof. Das tried to show that the tradition of the 'Panchasakhas' continues to exists in the 17th and 18th centuries as and even continues to operate upto the present day. He further argued that Mahima Dharma had begun in Orissa with the uprooting of the Jagannath cult. He saw a lot of possibilities and propects in the Mahima Dharma and declared that liberalism was its essence. It is true that this indigenous religious movement had some liberal principles like anti-casteism and common feast. But it is not understood how he came to conclusion that Jagannath cult has been uprooted in Orissa. This seems to be unhistorical because the intial success of Mahima Dharma in the second half of of the 19th century was at least partly "due to the introduction of the Jagannath cult in the former feudatory states of

⁵ Santiniketan, 1952.

orissa during that period. Mahima Dharma came to regard itself of the final stage of the true resumption of the Jagannath worship".⁶

Another work was published in 1968 by the Tribal Research Bureau.⁷ This work for the first time examined the social structure of the sect though in a very limited way. The survey was confined only to four sub-divisions of Orissa.⁸ It tried to determine whether and how for a conversion to Mahima Dharma is conducive to the integration of the tribes into the modern Indian society. This work, however, puts little emphasis on the interpretative and scholastic understanding of the sect and its ideas in relation to the social values.

One of the most important and valuable piece of research was produced by a German scholar, Ancharlot Eschmann, as part of the Research Project of the Heidelberg University. This research could have been an important breakthrough, but for her premature demise (1977) the work remained incomplete. One of her articles published in German (1977) was later translated into English.⁹ It gives very valuable information on the nature and functions of the sect. It reveals the relationship between the sect with the Jagannth cult. She pointed out that the sect emerged as a challenge against the orthodox dominant Jagannath cult and it retained many of the traditional

⁶ For details see Kulke, H., Tripathy, G.C., Eschmann, A. (et.al.), "The Cult of Jagannath and the regional traditions of Orissa". (Manohar, Delhi-1978)

⁷ "The impact of Satya Mahima Dharma on Scheduled cases and Scheduled Tribes in Orissa", Adivasi, Vol.X, Nov. 1968, p.44-76.

⁸ The Sub-Divisions were: Bhawani Patana, Rairakhola, Athagarh and Nayagarh.

⁹ Mahima Dharma: "An autochthonous Hindu Reform Movement" in "The Cult of Jagannath" Manohar, Delhi, 1998. p.375-410.

religious rituals and practices which it (the sect) describes as pure and authentic. This work tried to present the dissemination of the sect in the neighbouring states. However, this work showed little understanding of the dynamics of social formation in which the sect arose and grew.

Apart from the above stated sources the sect itself has taken the task of writing its own history and philosophy. A commendable work has been done by great Sanyasi, of the sect Biswanath Baba who expired recently (1992). He, for the first time, tried to systematise the ideas, legends, beliefs and myths concerning the history and philosophy of the sect. His major works,¹⁰ dealt mainly with the religious ideals, metaphysical discussions, miracles by Mahima swami, and rules and regulations of the sect. The works of the Baba do not present the ideas of the sect in a historical perspective, and are not well researched and documented.

However, the most valuable source of information seems to have been the poetic works of Bhima Bhoi' a dalit poet, (the most important direct disciple of Mahima Swami) who is said to have been bestowed with poetic genius and the former became the main propagator of Mahima Dharma as directed by the latter.

Originally the works of Bhima Bhoi were composed on palm leaf in the style of medieval bhakti literature. For a long time, these works were the only source (primary) of information regarding Mahima Dharma. The teachings of the sect were transmitted orally through these poems in form of bhajans (devotional songs) since

¹⁰ "Mahima Dharma Pratipadak", Bhubaneswar, 1934" "Mahima Dharma Ithas" MDAS, Cuttack, 1978, "Philosophy of Mahima Dharma", MDAS, Cuttack, 1987.

then and even continues in the same manner today. These bhajans became very popular in the villages of Western Orissa as the poet lived in his Asharam at Khaliapalla in Sonepur. Recently, these works have been published in the form of "collection of works of Bhima Bhoi" by some followers and sympathisers of the sect.¹¹

I shall deal with the works of both Biswanath Baba and Bhima Bhoi who were not only the intellectual preceptors of Mahima Dharma representing the sect's growth at its two different phases, but were the most authentic san'yasis of the sect. I have tried to construct the ideology of Mahima Dharma in the last chapter of this dissertation by interpreting these works.

Here I have tried to contextualise the available literature on Mahima Dharma on two basic issues, viz., the identity of the founder and the nature and characterisation of the sect.

The Identity of the Founder: Mahima Swami

According to the official history of Mahima Dharma, Mahima Swami was no human being. He was not born out of the mother's womb ('Ajonisambhuta'), rather he was a pure incarnation of Mahima (radiance or glory) of 'Sunya Anadi Brahma'. He spent many yugas (eras) in the Himalayas in Atmayogasamadhi. He travelled through many lands and set his foot in Orissa in 1826 A.D. when he publicly appeared in Puri. He was then called as 'Dhulia Baba' as he used to sleep and sit on dust. For the next twelve years, he thrived only on water and hence was called

¹¹ "Bhima Bhoi Granthabali", Dharma Grantha Store, Cuttack, 1975".

'Jalahari' or 'Nirahari Baba'. All these years he travelled all over coastal Orissa, (Puri, Cuttack, Bhubaneswar, Balasore, Khandagiri, Udayagiri, Dhuli and reached Kapilas in Dhenkanal district in 1838. There at Kapilas he gave up his lion-cloth (the only cloth over his body) and used the bark of Kumbhi tree as his dress. He meditated on a huge circular stone for twenty one days there. He then accepted his first disciple, initially called Jagannath and later named him Govinda. According to the teaching of the sect, Govinda Baba was God Jagannath himself, who came to know about the advent of Mahima Swami for the first time. Realising that the Lord of the Universe has been incarnated as Mahima Swami, Jagannath left his temple in Puri in order to serve his true deliverer and propagate his teachings.

After initiating Jagannath, the Swami subsisted only on fruits for twelve years and was known as 'Phalahari Baba'. At Kapilas he was patronised by the mother of the king of Dhenkanal who along with the king himself were disciples of the Swami as described in the scriptures of Mahima Dharma.¹²

Besides the mythical biography written and believed by the followers of the sect, there have been other writings, to trace the actual personality of the founder. The "Jagannath Temple Correspondence" gives another version. It says that Mahima Swami was a Vaishnava who originally settled on the mountain of Kapilas near the Shiva Shrine. He took part in the temple service, looked after those who sought

¹² Biswanath Baba, "History of Mahima Dharma": Cuttack, 1978, p.26.

recovery from diseases and other household problem and had tremendous success in it. This practice won him considerable popularity¹³.

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The then Chief Commissioner of the Central Province in his report on the sect gave yet another story... 'There is a peculiar sect of "Hindu dissentiers" in the Sambalpur district, known as Kumbhipatias. The word 'Kumbhipatias' is derived from 'Kumbhi', a tree and 'pat' the bark of tree. The sect is so called because its followers make ropes from the bark of the Kumbhi tree and wear them round their waist. The religion is also known as 'Alekh', and its followers claim 'revelation' as its foundation. It is said, Alekh Swami, the God incarnate used to reside in the Himalayas but in 1864 he came to Malbiharpur in Banki in Cuttack district and revealed this religion to 64 persons, the principal of whom was Govinda Das. It was chiefly owing to the exertion of these disciples that the religion was propagated. Alekh Swamy moved to Dhenkenal, a feudatory state, where, for 3 years preceding his death he led the life of a wonderer. Although this religious cult originated in Cuttack, it spread rapidly in the district of Sambalpur and men of all castes and classes except the Oriya brahmins embraced it'.¹⁴

Yet another interesting version appeared in a letter of the Commissioner of Orissa Division, to the Under Secretary to the Government of Bengal regarding the origin and growth of the sect.

He writes:

¹³ "Jagannath Temple corespondence", Mandir Parichalana Samiti, No. 131, p. 132.

¹⁴ Report of the Commissioner of Central Province JASB, 1882 p.6.



The founder of the sect is said to have been one Mukund Das. He lived for a long time in Puri an Achari Vaishnava, and was known as the 'Dhulia Babaji' from the fact of his smearing his body with ashes. About thirty year ago he left Puri and came to Dhenkanal, one of the Tributary States of Cuttack, where he selected his dwelling place in the Kapilas hills near a the shrine of Mahadeva. During his sojourn at Kapilas, he was known to be devout worshipper of the local idol, and took much pains in improving the place by cutting the jungle, making gardens, looking after the Bhog or sacred food of the idol, and taking care of the pilgrims who visit the hills periodically. This procured him the respect of the mother of the late Maharajah of Dhenkanal, who supplied his food. He gradually succeeded in securing the respect of the people of the surrounding villages, and the popular belief was that he was in secret communion with the idol and could successfully intercede with it on behalf of its votaries. The currency of this belief was further facilitated by the fact of his taking special care of the sick people who resorted to Kapilas for the benefit of their health, and very generally succeeded in getting it restored, and his visiting the temple at the dead of night while every one had retired to rest.

After establishing his reputation and securing the respect of the people, Mukund Das began to preach that Mahadev and the other odials worshipped by the Hindus were nothing else but stones and woods, and that the worship of these destructible articles was useless and of no avail. For him the Creator of the universe was Alekh or Mahima (which literally means 'glorious') a spiritual being without form, omnipresent and omniscient, and that he alone could hold communion with him and get his prayers granted. He eschewed his kaupin (waist cloth) and kanthi (wooden beads worn round the neck), the two distinctive features of a Vaishnava, and wore kumbhipat (the bark of a tree called kumbhi) to cover his nakedness.

From Kapilas, Mukund Das went to Puri, and then came to Daruteng in Khurda district where he built a tungi (a place of worship), and commenced to propagate the new doctrine. It was at this place that Mukund Das was defied and began to be addressed as the Mahima Gosain¹⁵.

¹⁵ Proceedings of the Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, January, 1882, pp.2-4.

And again the same source the following extract from the report of the Manager of Dhenkanal who threw some light on the 'real sentiments of the swami'.

The man who was first called the Phalahari Gosain was afterwards designated Mahima Gosain and was believed to be an incarnation of the Almighty God. In the year 1874, while I was on tour in the interior of Dhenkanal, the founder of the Mahima or Alekh religion went with me from place to place and was with me for about one week, and I also saw him on several other occasions, but I never heard from him that he professed to be the Creator of the world as his disciples and followers believed him to be. From what I heard from him, I concluded that he believed that the Creator of the World was spiritual Being, omnipresent, and omniscience, without any form whom he called Mahima or Alekh Prabhu, and that he alone could communicate with the Alekh Prabhu and get does what he wished. He believed in the existence of the Hindu gods and goddesses, but said that they were under his commands, and that they were bound to obey whatever he wished them to do.¹⁶

These biographical sketches of the Mahima Swami, if analysed properly reveals some interesting trends. The omission of a specific identify of the Swami in the text of Mahima Sampradaya, (community) seems to be 'deliberate' and 'purposive'. Perhaps they wanted to evolve a new alternative order (to the Jagannath cult) based on the spiritual authority of the founder. It unites the most important elements of Orissa history of the religion and subordinates it to the authority of Mahima Swami. The Saivism is represented by Kapilas Temple and the the Snake God, the Mother Goddess (Annapurna) and Jagannath are at the service of the new deliverer.

The most important of these elements is the Jagannath cult which the Mahima Dharma tried to bring under is spiritual fold. Jagananth viewed as the 'Great

¹⁶ Ibid. p.4.

Tradition' which received royal patronage and tried to absorb other 'little traditions' within its cultural hegemonic fold. By devaluating the importance of the Deity and the dominant Jagannath cult, Mahima Dharma perhaps tried to establish its own spiritual and moral supremacy.

On the other hand it appears in the writings of the 'dominant tradition' that an attempt was made to diminish the significance of the sect. This was done by ascribing the Guru as an earlier Vaishnava and explaining the emergence of Mahima Dharma as an extension and continuation of an old tradition (Vaishnavism especially), without any thing new to offer.

The tradition of the deletion of the past identity (not only of the guru) but also of all Mahima followers) and the practice of evolving a new identity is observed in the Mahima society even today. No Mahima sanyasi would ever talk about or disclose his past identity, his earlier caste, occupation, parental identity, native place etc. This rule has helped them to preserve the sect from the alignment that might arise on caste lines associated with parental identity within and outside the cult.¹⁷

This of course was the beginning of a movement to challenge the dominant value system and the base on which it sustains itself. Empirically the evolution of Mahima Dharma brought into existence a movement which questioned the authority of the king and the brahmins and their combined hegemony over the society. This

¹⁷ Nath, S: "Mahima Dharma" in "Sidelights of Orissa History and Culture" (ed.) M.N.Das, Vidyapuri, Cuttack, 1977, p-117.

notion of protest and challenge probably prompted Mahima Swami to settle at Kapilas in Dhenkanal district, a feudatory state of contemporary Orissa.

The curious description of the dominant Jagannath cult in the writings of Mahima Dharma can possibly be explained in two ways. Firstly, as it is stated earlier that the Jagannath cult was the symbol of brahmanical orthodoxy and also an instrument for the kings to receive obedience from the people in the hinterland. Hence by portraying Lord Jagannath as subordinate to Mahima Swami, the founder wanted to establish the sway of Mahima cult over the people and the rulers. Another implication of this process was to deprive the brahmins of their hereditary claims. Secondly, as Herman Kulke has emphasised that the Introduction of Jagannath worship for the subjects of the feudatory Rajas not only meant religious reform but was also a symbol of new form of oppressive Hindu kingship in the former tribal areas. This situation had naturally promoted a movement that regarded itself as the final stage and the true resumption of Jagannath worship, thereby admitting everyone, even the lower sections that were no longer tolerated at this time within the orthodox Jagannath cult.¹⁸

This becomes evident in an exemplary way the Mahima Dharma readmits an essential element of Jagannath worship in its original meaning which is no longer applied in Puri. For instance, the "common feast" (Satsang Gosthi) between persons belonging to all castes. During a Satsangha feast one finds this occurrence. Simultaneously the temple of Puri was devaluated with the imagination that Jagannath

¹⁸ For details see "The Cult of Jagannath". Manohar, Delhi, 1978.

had left the temple in order to serve Mahima Swami. Jagannath is equated with Buddha i.e the penultimate incarnation of Vishnu. The idea of Jagannath's replacement with the appearing of the "Kalki avatar" (another eschatological deliverer) is often found in medieval Oriya texts of Panchasakhas. Mahima Dharma interprets these texts as a prophecy about the advent of Mahima Swami. According to this point of view, it is only logical that some of the rites of the temple at Puri are being performed at present in Goddi Mandira (the seat of the founder in Joranda), by doing which it is proudly pointed out that the "Niti Babas" performed the worship here (at Joranda) like the "Pandas of Puri".¹⁹

Another parallel is also noteworthy. The historiography of the sect tries to repeatedly ascribe to its own founder (and his teachings), an equally close connection with the royalty, as the exponents of Jagannath Cult did earlier. The Raja of Dhenkanal, Bhagiratha Bahadur, is described as the follower of the sect who turned to Mahima Swami in all important problem. In fact Mahima Swami, himself appears to have strove for close connection with the Raja of Dhenkanal. The report of the Manager of Dhenkanal state confirms that in 1857 Mahima Swami during the first big festival at Joranda, wanted to handover all offerings of the believers to the Raja, but the later refused".²⁰

This aspect of Dharma's historiography is definitely indicative of attributing itself similar status as that of the dominant cult. Symbolically it tried to incorporate

¹⁹ Eschmann. A., op.cit, p.388.

²⁰ Ibid., p.391.

in some of the rites of the Jaganath cult. The sect has tried to do two things at the same time. On the one hand, it imitates certain practices of the dominant tradition, which are applied in 'reformed' manner within the sects own practices. On the other hand, the sect devalues the importance of the Jagannath cult, by making its God a disciple and hence subordinate to the Guru (Mahima Swami). Thus there is double movement which ensures superior position to the Dharma as well as deligitimise the claims of the dominant cult.²¹

On the basis of the preceeding analysis, it is evident that Mahima Dharma, make a deliberate attempt to evolve on alternative order to the Jagannath Dharma. A conspicuous attempt is made to organise the people who have remained at the receiving end of the old value system, through a new value system. The works or literature of the sect reveals that the founder of the sect has been attributed with a mythical tradition that would ensure itself a platform from where it can effectively challenge the system of dominance inherent within the Jagannath cult.

Nature and Characterisation of the sect

Another problem seems to be the issue of characterisation of the sect. Whether Mahima Dharma owes its origin to any previous tradition or not constitute a major problem. Historians and scholars of the dominant tradition have been keen on drawing lines between the features of the sect and the post movements with similar themes to establish a sense of a continuity, which appear to be superfluous.

²¹ Das, S., op.cit., p.36.

Broadly there are two schools of thought on the issue of the nature of Mahima Dharma. The first group of scholars such as N.N. Vasu and B. Mishra, who look at it as a 'new-Buddhist' movement. The second view is expressed by the followers and sympathisers of the sect who out rightly reject the notion of continuity between Mahima Dharma and other earlier sects such as the Panchasakha tradition. Pachasakha tradition refers to the legacy of the literature of the 'Five Friends' (Balram Das, Jagannath Das, Achyutananda Das, Yosabanta Das and Anata Das' of 16th and 17th Centuries. These were exponents of Vaishnavism and promoted it through their literature. Although they were not against the Jagannath cult, they did oppose the growing orthodoxy and brahamical dominance in the contemporary society. They called Lord Jagannath as one of the incarnation of Buddha. This has led some scholars to argue that they were 'cypto-Buddhists'. The Panchasakhas like Mahima Dharma worshipped 'Sunya'(Void) and believed in Nirguna Brahma . This has perhaps led some scholars to say that Mahima Dharma was an extension of the Panchasakha tradition.

The first scholarly work on Mahima Dharma was written by N.N. Vasu in 1908. He tried to trace the philosophical lineage of Mahima Dharma in his work. His narrative views the growth of Mahima cult in the 19th century as a philosophical continuity of the Mahayana Buddhism and the Panchasakha tradition.

His argument probably gains strength from the evidence that 'various religious books of Orissa in the 16th and 17th century contends that many 'cypto- Buddhists' were residing in various parts of Utkal". This view is also supported by the Census

report of Bengal (1901) which states that in the 17th century 'Buddha - Guptanaths' (crypto-Buddhists) wandered in various parts of India and found Buddhism flourishing in many places. Then it is lost altogether. For the next century Buddhism was absolutely unknown in India.²² On this basis, N.N. Vasu builds up his argument that 'how can a religion which had a sway over the masses for centuries, be wiped out completely leaving no trace behind?' In fact he argues that, "there is ample evidence to show that even after the 18th Century, Buddhism was not altogether a lost creed, the much honoured memory of Buddha was not lost in India. In the hills of Garjats, the crypto- Buddhists survived and cherished the loving memory of their religion".²³ To keep them secured from royal oppression in society, they passed for devout Vaishnavca. He further adds, "under the benign spirit of religious toleration and the noble and fastening spirit of freedom of thought inaugurated and scrupulously adhered to by the British Government, Mahima Dharma which began for over 40 years rouse itself to throw off its masks and to reassert itself duly".²⁴ Pandit B.Mishra following the arguments of Prof. Vasu contended that, "Mahima Dharma is an offshoot of the Sahajaya Vaishnava cult".²⁵ Sahajaya cults stood for one of the several paths which Vajrayanism gave rise to. According to this school, Mahima Dharma can be characterised as fusion of Buddhist Philosophy and

²² Census Report of Bengal, Calcutta, 1901, part I - p.203.

²³ Vasu, N.N. op.cit., p.73.

²⁴ Ibid., pp.151-152.

²⁵ Mishra, Binayak, "History of Oriya Literature" Binod Bihari, Cuttack, 1972, p.178.

Vaisanizm.²⁶ Keeping in line with this view Artaballava Mohanty ascribed (in the preface of "stutichintamani") Achyutananda Das, (one of the "Five Friends" of Panchasakha tradition) as the earliest inspirator of the Mahima Sect.²⁷

Opposed to these views, the followers of Mahima Dharma believe that it has no lineage with either the Buddhist or the Panchasakha tradition. It is rather a spontaneous movement whose origin can be traced to Mahima Swami. Biswanath Baba (who expired recently and underwhom A.Eschmann worked on Mahima Dharma) wrote an elaborate narrative on the history of Mahima Dharma, rejecting the sect's lineage to any earlier religious or philosophical traditions. He tried to clarify that 'Mahima Dharma is neither an offshoot of any cult or sect nor is related in anyway to Buddhism. He contends that to destroy the sins of Kali- Yuga, Mahima Swami came to this earth and He alone in the originator of Mahima Dharma.'²⁸

Other sympathers of the sect, also argue that Mahima Dharma and Buddhism have enough philosophical differences between them to be called similar movement Prof. Chittaranjan Das in his work criticises NN Vasu's analysis as 'conjectural and based on 'erroneous interpretation of Oriya literature'.

However, it is the writings on Ancharlott Eschmann we find a more acceptable description of the Mahima Dharma and its nature. To her Mahima Dharma

²⁶ Mukherjee, P., "Sahajaya Dharma and Panchasakha Tradition, of Orissa", Calcutta, 1983.

²⁷ Mohanty, A "Stuti Chintamani" 'Preface' Utkal Univ. BBSR 1965 p.23.

²⁸ For details see "The History of Mahima Dharma".Cuttack, 1978.

was an autochthonous Hindu reform movement that turned against the Jagannath worship in particular.²⁹

This argument seems plausible as Mahima Dharma in its ritualistic aspects bear certain resemblance with that of the Jagannath cult and at the same time it tried to challenge the dominant notions of the Jagannath tradition. However, it would be superfluous to agree with the Vasuvian school that the use of the terms like "Buddha", "Dharma" in the literatures of Mahima Cult and the poems Bhima Bhoi in particular to establish a link between Buddhism and Mahima Dharma. After the 'Chaitanya Movement' in Orissa, the Buddhist concept became very much a part of the philosophical vocabulary of the Jagannath cult. So Mahima Dharma could have borrowed these terms from the literatures of Jagannath tradition. 'Malika', (apocalyptic narrative on Jagannath) considers, Buddha as one of the incarnations of Lord Jagannath. But this does not make Jagannath cult a 'neo-Buddhist' movement. Similarly it goes beyond historical and philosophical reasons to say that Mahima cult is a continuation of Buddhist or even the Panchiasakha tradition. Nevertheless, the influence of these tradition was there mostly due to their nature as protest movements. But all these movements have to be studied and understood in their historical specificity. Hence, there is a need to study the growth of the sect and its spread in different periods of time.

After the establishment of the sect and initiation of the first line of disciples, the second phase of the sects' growth started. It is marked by Mahima Swami's

²⁹ Eschmann. A, op.cit. p.374.

preaching and prorogation of the Dharma in the former feudatory states of Tigiria, Anugul, Dhenkal, Baudh, Raiakhol, Sonepur and Banki'. The Swami set up Tungi and Mathas in these places and gathered on apparently very fast growing number of disciples around himself. He ordained them initially as kaupinidhari and later as Balkaldhari monks. The Guru is said to have ordained sixty four Balkaldharis who were also termed as 'Siddha Babas', bearing a commonality with the Natha Sect, which also had 64 'Sidha Nathas'.³⁰

The third epoch in the history of Mahima Dharma began with the death of Mahima Swami in 1876. The death of the founder had caused some unrest.³¹ The Mahima followers also confirm that there was some disturbances after the death of the Guru. After the unrest, the post-1876 period witnessed a division within the sect. Bhima Bhoi although participated in the first council held at Joranda did not join in the construction of the shrine there. He built his own 'Ashram' out Khaliapala in Sonepur in 1877 with the support of some 'Kaupundiharis'. Raja of Sonepur Niladhara Singh offered him patronage. Joranda, the main centre of the sect became the centre of strictly organised monastic order and did not admit women, but admitted them as lay disciple of the sect, where as in Khaliapala, women were accepted and a rather tantiric trend developed there.³²

³⁰ Ibid, p.392.

³¹ Ibid, p.374-375.

³² Ibid, p.388.

A decisive, milestone in the development of the sect took place in 1896, one year after the death of Bhima Bhoi. Upto that time no new Sanyasis were initiated and it was feared that the order would become extinct. In this year, however, the last Siddha Sanyasi initiated by Mahima Swami himself received a 'Sunya Bani' (voice from the void) to initiate the novices who had joined the order in the mean time. In the next twenty years about hundred sanyasis were initiated and the further existence of the order was ensued.

In 1912 the same Baba received the "order" to ordain a few of the Kaupunidhari marks as Kumbhipatia or Balkaldhari. This resulted in a final break between the two denominations since Kripasindhu Das, a Kumbipatia did not accept this "Order" or Sunya Bani and moved out of Joranda with his followers.

This division infact had a tremendous effect on the unity of the sect. It also reflected the tendency of conflict on the basis of hierarchical order on which the monostic life of the Mahima sect is based.

The Joranda section of the sect has extended its functioning into the coastal districts of Orissa where as the Khaliapala section still is dominant in the rural areas of the western belt where there is a greater concentration of tribals and lower caste people.

However due to the sincere efforts of Biswanath Baba, Mahima Dharma has come to lime light in recent years. Baba for the frist time systematised the teachings of the sect but in doing so he has "sanskritised" them and reformulated them vis-a-vis the older sanskrit texts.

It appears that Baba had diverted from the cardinal principles and ideals for which the sect emerged. It is alleged that the text (Sanskritised) of the Baba have softened the antagonism of Mahima movement against the Jagannath cult. Thus the myths and symbols associated in the historiography of Mahima Dharma reveals its nature and purpose.

The myth narrating the arrival of Mahima Swami and the subsequent spread of the sect indicates certain trends that outlines the relation of the sect with that of the dominant system. The writings of the dominant tradition on the other hand reveals the tendency of 'appropriation' and cooption that would ultimately lead the sect to lose its significance within the broader framework of Hindu society.

In these myths of the Mahima sect 'there seems to have been an attempt to unite under its spiritual fold all the religious elements of contemporary Orissa. By portraying Jagannath as a follower of Mahima Swami, the sect tried to subordinate the dominant tradition to its own. This reflects the significance of the emergence of the sect which challenged the cultural hegemony enjoyed by the orthodox Jagannath cult. Hence it tried not only to displace the authority of the dominant tradition but also the system of brahmanical orthodoxy linked to it.

CHAPTER - III
ORGANISATION AND SPREAD
OF MAHIMA DHARMA

ORGANISATION AND SPREAD OF MAHIMA DHARMA

This chapter would look into the organisational patterns of the movement and discuss its spread in Orissa and other parts of India. The basic divisions among the followers, their religious customs and places of worship shall also be discussed in this chapter.

This movement could spread to many parts of Orissa and outside, due to its simple reformist tendencies and mass appeal. The devotional, heart touching songs of Bhima Bhoi became very popular in the villages among the illiterate poor masses.

Organisation

The Church of the Mahima cult is a democratic one¹. There is no distinction between the teacher and disciples. It is believed that all are disciples and equal in relation to him 'Alekha Param Bramha'.

Mahima Dharma provides for both the traditional system of the Hindus i.e. 'Grihasta' and 'Sanyasa' for its devotees. The lay devotees remain in their homes, engage themselves in their household occupations and obey the regulations of the cult prescribed for them. In a village where many followers of the cult reside, they construct 'Tungis' (small thatched houses) which serve as a religious centre for the village. Here the sanyasis reside when they come to preach the religion, the devotees gather to perform their simple ceremonies and bhajans are sung, throughout the night. Even the lay devotees do not eat or drink anything between sunset and sunrise.

¹ Patra, K.M., "Religious movement in Modern Orissa", Journal of Indian History, 55 1/2 1977 p.273.

Naturally they get ample time to get together to listen to a religious discourse by a 'Sanyasi', or to sing devotional songs at night. The cult does not prescribe rigid asceticism but lays stress on disciplined habits to control body and mind.

The monastic order of Mahima Dharma is divided into three stages i.e. (i) 'Bairagis' (ii) 'Apara Sanyasis (or Kapunidharis) (iii) 'Para Sanyasis(Or Balkaldharis). A person Who aspires to be 'Sanyasi' of the cult, first settles the affairs of his family in accordance with certain regulations and then gives up all ties with his home. He is then known as a 'Bairagi' and is allotted simple duties in the monastic order. He lives under close guidance of some senior Sanyasis'. After the initial period of training is over, he goes up to the next order and becomes an 'Apara Sanayasi'.² In a simple ceremony held on the precincts of the 'Sunya Mandir' at Joranda he accepts "Kaupina" (Loincloth) from a "Para" or Balkaldhari sayasin'. The sanyasis of this order are known by the title of 'Dasa' or the 'servants of God'. They take an active part in the management of the principal seat of the cult and are allowed to go for preaching in the country. The highest order of sanyasis in the Mahima cult are called 'Para sanyasin' and their insignia is the garment of kumbhi tree. Hence they are also Kumbhipatias and are addressed as 'Babas' (father) and 'Brahma Abadhuts. Both in the spiritual affairs and in the organisational matters, their decisions are final. Their discourses are accepted as most authentic exposition of religion.

The hallmark of this religious movement is total renunciation on the part of the Sanyasis. They are required to travel constantly, and are 'not to I beg more than

² Ibid., p. 277.

one meal from any householder and not to stay more than one night in any village'. One notable point regarding the disciples of the cult is that though both men and women can become lay devotees, only men are allowed to the monastic order. Women are strictly forbidden to enter into it and since the days of Mahima Swami this rule has been rigorously enforced.³ Later among "Kaupinidhari group" after the (first schism) women seems to have been allowed to become sanyasinis.

Norms of way of living

After the initiation, the believers have to submit to a strict way of living, the norms of which are composed of ethical and ritual commandments. The principal ethical commandments are i) Worship no idols, ii) Perform "Sarana" and Darshana" at the prescribed time, iii) Don't kill, iv) Do not lie, v) Do not steal, vi) Do not commit adultery, vii) follow the directions for sexual behaviour in marriage, viii) Show good will and kindness to all, ix) Exercise propriety, x) Show goodwill and kindness to all. Added to this a series of drastic ritual commandments: i) Accept no food from Brahmins, ii) Take nothing after the sun set, iii) Take bath every morning, before prayers, iv) Use no chairs or elevated seats, v) Put on exclusively cotton red ochred coloured cloth.⁴

Since these commandments influence the way of living very drastically and would not permit practice of any professions, there are different grades within the

³ Biswanath Baba, History of Mahima Dharma, p.28.

⁴ Eschmann, A., "Mahima Dharma" in, Jagannath Cult Manohar, Delhi - 1078 p.395.

initiated laymen as well as, whose members follow these rules very strictly or less rigorously. To the monks the rules cited above apply on an intensified scale and further supplemented with the some other norms. Chastity, having no property, duty to preach, move about as much as possible on foot, the forbiddance to visit one's own native place, not to establish contact with one's own relatives, not to speak about thier earlier life (original caste etc.).

Obedience only applied to the novices who follow one of the monks as Guru or teacher. The 'Balkaldhari or "Kumbhipatias" or the 'Para' sanyasis demand however a certain subordinationn of the "Apara" or "kaupinidhari" Sanyasi, practically speaking

In the case of Kaupinadhari group, the rules for the way of living of the Samnyasis are less rigid, there are sometimes also married babas who maintain a place of worship in their native village. The highest norms for all Sanyasis are the three aims, a) to work for the welfare of Gaddi b) for the welfare of the community and c) for the welfare of the entire world.

Social Customs

Birth, marriage and death

The rites in this sphere are not very distinct from the "normal" Hindu custom. For marriage, there is special ritual with account on simplicity - "Brahma Vivaha" - during which the hands of bride and bridegroom are put together. Unlike the common custom of cremating, the dead are mostly buried. This practice may have been borrowed from christianity.

Mahima marriage ceremony, however, takes place very occasionally. It is on one hand due to the fact that mostly individuals converted to the sect has an overwhelming majority in a few villages only. On the other hand, marriage, with its economical implications, is decisive, constitutive element of the Indian society and it is certain that a possible change in this society will affect this element slowly.⁵

Food Habits

Mahima Dharma does not restrict partaking any food except flesh of domestic animals. Even the sayansis take dry fish and meat of wild animals. Meat eating seems to have developed later, for Mahima Swami forbade his followers to consume meat. In this respect they follow 'Abadhuta Pantha', i.e. one should eat whatever he gets. Abadhuta did not recognise, any distinction between wild and domestic animals. Since animals goats, fowls, sheep are generally offered to Hindu deities as sacrifices, these should neither be reared nor their flesh taken Mahimites do not believe in sacrifices and rituals.⁶

Religious Customs

Initiation

The initiation (diksa) of the laymen takes place through a Sanyasi mostly on the occasion of one of the festivals. At dawn after the bath, the candidate gets a new dress and is exhorted to lead his new life according to the rules. After putting on the

⁵ Eschman, A., "Mahima Dharma" in Jagannath Cult and Regional Tradition of Orissa, Monohar 1978, p.401.

⁶ "Impact of Satya Mahima Dharma on SCs and STs" In Adivasi TRB, Bhubaneswar, Vol. X, No.1 1968-69, p.60.

new dress he prostrates himself in front of the **Sanyasi** who blesses him. Then he takes part in the sarana and darshana of the community for the first time. The initiation of the Sanyasis proceeds in the same way. However, it takes place in Joranda during the Gurupurnima festival. On the eve of initiation, all Samnyasis assemble in building of the Gaddi around a fire. The proposed novices prostrate themselves towards the east in front of the building and when all have assembled they are called inside and are questioned separately by the oldest of the Para sanyasis. They are accepted or rejected according to their answers. The congregation is wound up with the exhortation not to forget the three aims of the monk's life. During the night, the accepted candidates get their new dress from the Sanyasis who looks after them as novices. With this dress they assemble, after taking bath in early morning on the eastern side of the Gaddi Mandira. Thereafter they perform Sarana and Darshana at all the four doors of the three temples and then move to the older Para Samnyasis in order to get their blessings.

The initiation for Para Sanyasis is said to be performed in the same manner. The institution of such initiations, accessible to all castes, is without any doubt, both an "anti-Brahminic" elements and an approximation to Brahamic rites found more often in the sect's rites.⁷ A specially striking parallel is the 'twisted belt' which the Nambudiri Brahmins too get at the time of initiation (Upanayana).⁸

⁷ Ibid., p. 396.

⁸ E. Thurston "Castes and Tribes of Southern India" Vol 1. Madras 1909, p.274.

Sarana and Darsana

The main ritual of the sect is a complicated rite of prayer which is obligatory on all followers, monks, as well as laymen Sarana (literally "Shelter") and darsana ("view") mark its aim to take refuge, in Mahima Prabhu according to the concept of Bhakti in order to get his "view" i.e, to attain the consciousness of the union of one's own self with Mahima. Sarana and darsana must be performed in the morning before sun-rise by turning towards the east and in the evening immediately before carried out additionally for the third time at noon. Outwardly the rite consist of the seven time repetition of a minutely prescribed complicated sequence of prostrations. Between each pranama the persons praying stands against erect with raised hands and calls loudly "Alekh". Thereafter, the believers worship the Sanyasis by prostrating themselves and then they worship each other.⁹

Confession

The confession takes place in the courtyard of one of the ashramas. It begins with a short speech of the Sanyasi who sends all non participants out. Then each and every one comes forward and they are questioned about their lapses and whether they have already taken part in Satsanga Gosthi earlier. A few answer immediately that they had not committed any lapses and thereupon they are dismissed immediately. Thus no basic sin-consciousness is expressed here, but only the desire to purify oneself from the lapses committed. On this occasion, ethical lapses like killing, lying, stealing, adultery etc. seem to weight as heavily as ritual lapses, as for instance not

⁹ Eschmann, A., op.cit (1978) p.397.

to preform prayers at the correct time or to take something during night time etc. The Baba admonishes each and every one and makes sure of their intention, not to commit any mistakes in each and everyone and makes sure of their intention, not to commit by mistakes in future.

Although ethical and ritual lapses are reproached equally, a pastoral effort is still clearly discernible which ascertains the severity of a ritual lapse according to the intention behind committing.¹⁰ Noteworthy is the tendency to a uniform social ethics binding to all, which excludes certain morally questionable professions.¹¹

The sanyasis, too, have to make a confession before they are permitted to take part in "Satsanga Gosthi". In their case all lapses are atoned for much more severely. Besides this, there is also the possibility to impose fines on them, for which they have to ask their followers and in doing so have to give an account of their lapses. There is also the possibility of a temporary or a complete expulsion from the community.

Niti

This is one of the most important religious customs bearing resemblance to the Jagannath cult. The only form of temple cult recognized by the Mahima Dharma takes place in the Gaddi Mandira, the seat of Founder. In the interior of the Gaddi Mandira only the so called Niti Babas, (eighteen selected Para-Samnyasis) are

¹⁰ Eschmann, A. (1978) op.cit p. 399.

¹¹ For example, a money lender who confessed that he has to tell lie often and has to act firmly against his debtors, was with appropriate penitence, admitted for the time to the Satsanga Gosthi, but in principle he was given the option between his profession and the sect's membership.

allowed to enter. They open the temple doors, sweep the temple and then go round carrying a camara and striking gongs. This is an obvious adaptation of the worship of Jagannatha which is likewise termed as 'niti' (literally: "conduct" or "morality"). In the worship of Jagannatha, sweeping plays a decisive role: for example on the Car Festival the king himself has to sweep in front of the figures of gods. The 'camaras' are royal requisites which are likewise among the temple property of Jagannatha. In the same way, the striking of gongs marks important movements in Jagannatha - worship, for instance, throughout the period the chariots are moving, a lane of gong striking Brahmins is formed in front of the idols of gods.¹²

Satsanga Gosthi

Shortly before the next midday, Satsanga Gosthi takes place : a common meal for all laymen and monks who have been accepted in the order. Food is cooked by the laymen in the open at an especially demarcated place and is also taken there. The participants sit in long rows facing each other; women form a separate row. The meal, as well as each meal of the Babas, starts, with all participants putting a morsel in the mouth and concludes with the shouting of 'alekha' and the common expression of joy.¹³

As already mentioned, eating together by members of different casts depict a feature of medieval Nirguna Bhakti and forms a special characteristic of the Jaganatha temple. There prasada (literally: "grace"), i.e. food offered to the gods, is

¹² Ibid. p. 401

¹³ Ibid., p.401.

eaten by all the pilgrims together irrespective of the castes they belong to. However, the rite of eating together lost a lot of its original practical significance, after an entirely free access to the temple was again confined to the higher castes in the 16th century. The reason why prasada can be taken by all human beings lies in the nature of this food itself which justifies an exceptional situation. Having been offered to the gods, it is so pure that nothing can pollute it at all. Even if a dog has eaten from it, it does not lose anything of its divine value. Such exceptions are mentioned by the Panchasakha, too.¹⁴

The ritual of Satsanga Gosthi that can be practised everywhere and at any time is an attempt to make this exception a rule for all true believers. Because all the devotees stand in the same relation to 'Param Brahma' after the purification of their lapses.¹⁵ Thus it broke the caste rules of the Hindus ritually.

Festivals

Purnima

The typical festival of the sect is Purnima celebration, which takes place on every full moon day. It is rather a meeting of the followers who come together from a bigger circle, take the evening meal together (which is mostly donated by a rich member of the community), perform sarana and darshana thereafter and then remain together during the night. There sermons are preached, religious debates are held and also bhajanas are sung, accompanied by only two instruments - cymbal and

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

tambourine. These two musical instruments are permitted only. All other instruments even the conchshell are forbidden, probably because they are too closely connected with the Hindu cult.

In the festivals of Kaupina group, fire (dhuni) is of great importance. The worship of fire as the manifestation of the Highest Being has also apparently been pushed to the background under Bisvanthana Baba. Bhima Bhoi calls Mahima Swami also "Dhunia Gosvami" whom one can realize in fire. The worshipping of the fire connects Mahima Dharma directly with the folk worshipping of earth goddesses who manifest themselves to some extent in fire too.¹⁶

Balyalila

Balyalila can be linked - but it is not a must - to the Purnima celebration. It can be performed at any time at will. Balyalila (literally "children's play") is a rite originally introduced, no doubt, by Chaitanya.

This reflects the influence of Gaudiya Vaishnavism under chaitanya. It consists of the distribution of sweets to children. At the Gaddi mandira in Joranda it takes place every evening.

Establishment of new Tungis or Ashrmas

Another festival that is celebrated only occasionally is the inauguration: a new Ashrama or Tungi. The new building and its vicinity are smeared with cow dung and then it is inaugurated. A Sanyasi lights fire in the inner portion and the community

¹⁶ Ibid., p.388.

keeps singing as it takes seven round of this fire. In other aspects the festival proceeds just like a normal Purnima or Balyalila festival.

Guru Purnima

The principal festival is the celebration of Gurupurnima on the full moon day of the month of Phalguna which is considered the founder's death anniversary". This festival is celebrated in all the large centres of the sect and in Joranda it lasts for four days. Here it has the character of regular Mela, with annual fair activity, own advertisements theatre and circus presentation of the most rural nature. It attracts a few thousand pilgrims and many curious spectators. The pilgrims from closer neighbourhood often come separately, those from far off places remain under the guidance of Sanyasi who, with an apparent, reference to the Pandas in Puri, lives with this group in the pilgrim's lodging and looks after them. Gurupurnima is also the annual gathering of the wandering Sanyasis at which decisions of general nature, (for example possible expansion of temple building etc.) are taken and management jobs are assigned afresh. The general climax is the Purnima (full moon) night which the followers spend in small singing groups in the temple courtyards. For Gurupurnima, the temples in Joranda are specially decorated : the enclosure above the Samadhi of Mahima Swami is mounted with standards and banners, which are used only on this day. Besides this, huge lamps are placed in front of the 'Sunya' and 'Dhuni' temples and at all the four doors of the Gaddi Mandira. These are constantly fed with ghee by means of stands and ladders and illuminate the temples. Donation for the ghee offering on this day are collected throughout the year. In the night before

Purnima the intimation of Sanyasis takes place, during the day itself the Sanyasis make confession. On the last day after the actual Purnima day the constitutive ritual of the sect, the community meal takes place which is otherwise also celebrated more often.¹⁷

Places of worship

Since Mahima Dharma rejects idol worship of traditional Hinduism, this sect recognises no proper temple and just as little any proper worship. Seen from outside the principal shrines (for instance Joranda and Khalliapala) are of course in accordance with the Orissa pattern of Hindu temples yet they have no sculpture of any sort. Most places of worship only occasionally contain fire, none of them however, have any idol or other symbols.

Bhajanalaya, Caupadhi, Ashrama, Matha

In some isolated villages a bhajanalaya, a simple fire-place, mostly built to begin which is provided with a leafy canopy on Purnima days or other occasions and becomes the meeting place of believers. The next stage is the building of a caupadhi or ashrama or matha. Caupadhi denotes a hall, a thatched roof on four posts. But it is also called the "village school" or a Sanskrit school in which teaching is imparted free of cost. The taking up of just this idea is characteristic of teaching is imparted free of cost. The taking up of just this idea is characteristic of the sect's tendency. The word ashrama has probably been introduced by Bisanatha Baba and denotes a fixed dwelling. Ashrama and caupadhi are meeting places for the followers and serve

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 55

as lodging for the monks passing along that way. The ashramas are mostly inhabited by Apara Sanyasis who are not bound by the obligation of wandering constantly. Unlike the traditional ashrams the asramas of the Balkaladhari group do not possess land of any sort and depend on Joranda for their financial needs. The construction of such buildings always takes place out of earmarked donations made by the local communities, whereas the mathas of the Kaupindhari group frequently possess land are often set up the individual initiative of Baba who attaches a place of worship to its estate.

Tungi

Caupadhis or ashramas, are often complemented by tungi, a separate fenced building in which only monks are allowed to enter. Mostly it contains nothing and serves as a store for unused palm umbrellas and Balkalas or Kaupinas of the monks. The main function of these buildings appears to be sphere of special purity.

Perhaps this is just an adaption or reaction to a particularly wide-spread rural institution in the last century, i.e. a special house for the preservation of Bhagavata Purana. These houses or huts were also called tungis and member of the lower castes were not permitted to enter them, a fact which played a considerable role in the biography of Bhima Bhoi.

The Major Centres of the Cult

Joranda

The central shrine of all denominations is Joranda, a small village in the north-west of Dhankankal, the so-called Mahima Gaddi. "Gaddi" literally means

"throne" or "mountain" as well as the seat of god, king or a great personality and also his Samadhi or the seat.

The principal temple in Joranda is accordingly the Gaddi Mandira which has nothing other than a small platform. Beside this there is also a Dhuni Mandira in Joranda which has a constant fire, the ash of which is preserved and has healing effects. And there is a Sunya Mandira - naturally completely empty - which is situated somewhat away and is visited infrequently.

In front of the entrance of the Gaddi Mandira there is a fenced place with a small Sunya Mandira and a shrine for Dhuni. This place serves the Kaupinadhari group exclusively, that celebrates Purnima here. Besides these three temples, Mahima Gaddi consists of several "monastery enclosures" each of which contains different tungies, ashrams and Caupadhis. The Balakaladhari group maintains the two largest enclosure. The chief utility of one of these is to enable the Para Samayasis to stay in Joranda for long period. By spending every alternative night there, they do not violate the commandment of constant travelling. The second complex - probably the oldest - is very large and has a Simhavara ("lion gate"), "like at the Jagannatha Temple". It includes lodgings for pilgrims, school in which novices and younger monks can learn Sanskrit, libraries, a sort of archive and - also a conscious approximation to Puri - a store room in which banners, standards and lamps are Joranda in the heart of the village a relatively small complex.

Khalliapala

Near Joranda, in Khalliapala, is the Gaddi of Bhima Bhoi for the Kaupinadhari group, an additional centre. The temple is not surrounded by wall, it stands freely accessible surrounded only by several smaller shrines for the wives and children of Bhima Bhoi. Temple and shrines have only empty niches. A farm building is directly attached to the temple in which the Baba responsible for the shrine lives. Unlike Joranda, there is "no activity" here besides the festivals.

Spread of Mahima Dharma

In the second half of the 19th Century, when the educated urban people of Orissa were inclined to accept the Brahma faith as a reaction to the preachings of Christian Missionaries, Mahima Dharma brought a large number of uneducated rural people into its fold. It seems to have arrested the growth of Christianity in those pockets where the missionaries were trying to woo the poverty stricken, poor, illiterate masses. In course of time, it spread to the neighbouring states like Bengal, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar etc. The exponents of this sect never likes the lime light of publicity and their activities were shrouded in obscurity, for a long time.

Mahima Swami's long missionary career established a foundation for this cult which soon started to spread to other parts of Orissa and acquire a considerable number of followers. It was basically popular and had a large number of followers in Garjat states (feudatory states) of Orissa. There is a controversy regarding the place of origin or the propagation of Mahima Dharma. Generally it is believed that Mahima

Swami began his missionary career from Kapilas in Dhenkanal District, but from the proceeding of Asiatic society of Bengal (1882) it appears that he commenced to propagate Mahima Dharma at Darteng in Khurda district.

"...From Kapilas, Mukunda Das (the controversial name of the Mahima Swami) went to Puri, where he remained for some time in a hut on the sands near the temple of Loknath Mahadev. He next came to Darteng in the Government state of Khurda in Puri where he built a tungi (a place of worship) and commenced to propagate the new doctrine.¹⁸

Mahima Swami from after his first appearance in Puri (1826) travelled far and wide in Puri, Khandgiri Hill and its neighbouring areas. Thereafter he moved to Kapilas in 1836.¹⁹

He travelled to Kasipur in Dhenkanal and the neighbouring areas and converted a number of people including house holders into the cult. Many gungis were constructed there and Balyalila was celebrated. He then visited Kankanda Pala, Mahadia, Madhi in the same district.²⁰ A large number of people, seems to have welcomed him and accepted his teachings. But the Raja of Hindol created some hindrance for the propagation of Mahima Dharma. Thereafter Bhagawan Das Baba and Ananta Das Baba immediately reached Hindol and discussed the matter with the

¹⁸ Proceedings of Asiatic society of Bengal, Jan, 1882, p.3.

¹⁹ Utkala Dipika (1-06-1867).

²⁰ Biswanath Baba, Mahima Dhama Itihas, Dharma Grantha Store, Cuttack, 1978, p.31.

Raja who later embraced the Mahima cult.²¹ Mahima swami directed his followers to construct tungis at Bahabandha and Ranjogal in Hindol subdivision, Leaving, Bahabadha, the Swami moved to Berhampur.

During his missionary career the Swami travelled to places like Darpari Dalijoda, Magarojpur, Banfua, Sasipatna, Mahisiahanda Choudwar, Khuntuni, Athagarh. The King of Athagarh was a great patron of Mahima Swami, His visit to Malbiharpur in Banki (1866) is recorded in the report of Banki Tahsildar and is corroborated by the report of Commissioner of Orissa Division.²² The survey carried out by A.Das, Kiran Bala Devi and N.Das under Tribal Research Bureau indicates that Mahima Dharma was popular in, Nayagarh, Athagarh, Rairakhol and Bhawani Patana Sub divisions especially.

Since 1881, Mahima Dharma has spread beyond the borders of Orissa in the neighbouring provinces. Many surveys have been made from time which present different statistical data about the number of Ashrams in Orissa as well as other states.

²¹ Bisawanath Baba, "Sidha Sadhu Charitramruta" Cuttack, 1972, p.44.

²² Orissa State Archives, Letter No.443, p.5.

A. Eschmann Compiled the following figures.

States	Ashrams Tungis		Total
	Balkaldhari	Kaupinidhari	
Orissa	777	595	1372
A.P.	40	46	86
Bihar	8	--	8
Assam	--	51	--
Bengal	--	65	65
Total	826	757	1583

Another survey carried out in 1972 gives the following figures without separately categorising the Balkaldharis and the Kaupinidharis.²³

Orissa	-	757
A.P.	-	50
Assam	-	33
Bengal	-	73
Bihar	-	12
M.P.	-	74

As regarding the social base of the sect Eschmann gave the following details.

²³ Mahima Dharma Darshana, Koraput, Orissa, 1972.

About 2/3 of the followers belong to the 'chasa' (farmers) or allied castes (like Kaibarta, gopala etc.) About 8% were tribals. The number of Harijan members (SCs and STs) corresponds to nearly that of Brahmins (about 4%).²⁴

However, the survey carried out by the Tribal Research Bureau, Orissa, gives a different picture of the sects social base. This research was carried on a limited scale and was confined to four sub-divisions of Orissa to find out the impact of Mahima Movement on the scheduled castes and scheduled Tribes. Thus at this point no definite statistical data can be presented on the social structure of the sect.

An elaborate and detailed field work needs to be undertaken to examine the social base of the sect.

²⁴ This assessment is related to the "Balkaldhari" group only.

CHAPTER - IV
IDEAS AND OBJECTIVES
OF MAHIMA DHARMA

IDEAS AND OBJECTIVES OF MAHIMA DHARMA

This chapter would seek to construct the ideology of Mahima Dharma by analysing the ideas and the objectives implicit in literature of the sect. While doing so I would evaluate the various traditions, myths, symbols legends and practices associated with the sect's philosophy. In other words I would discuss the social and moral visions of the movement embodied in its philosophy.

Mahima Dharma as a protest movement against the dominant tradition (the Jagannath Cult) is marked by a distinct moral and philosophical vision. The major concern of the sect seems to be that of building a 'model' social order and it derives the notion of a model society from the critique of the existing orthodox dominant system. The need for building a new moral order arises when value system of the dominant tradition no more serves the popular aspirations and demands of the contemporary social conditions. Hence the 'decadent, crisis-ridden 19th century Hindu society' is lamented upon and cited as the cause for the evolution of the sect. The concept of 'Kaliyuga' frequently cited by the ideologues of Mahima Dharma denotes a social crisis in 19th century Orissa and the solution to this crisis, seems to be emergence of the sect with Mahima Swami as the new liberator. Thus, Mahima Dharma' had a definite counter ideology or an alternative conception of society which was inherent in its philosophy.

The Problem:

To construct a narrative on the ideology of Mahima movement is not an easy task. This is precisely because there is a paucity of literature and records reflecting

the visions of the sect. Most of the literature produced by the sect have dealt with its philosophy on the basis of its religious and spiritual significance without much emphasis on its social vision. Secondly most of the literature of the sects are in Oriya and especially the works of Bhima Bhoi written in the typical medieval Panchasakha style. These works are mostly in allegorical form and hence demand a critical comprehension and interpretation.

I have tried to make an ideological narrative of Mahima movement by analysing the literature produced by Biswanath Baba in the 20th century and Bhima Bhoi's poetic works.¹

These two intellectual preceptors of Mahima Dharma represent the views of the sect in two different phases of its growth; Earlier Bhima Bhoi's works were in Palm leaves manuscripts and recently have been published. Biswanath Baba on the other hand was the most important preceptor of the sect who for the first time presented an extensive literature by systematizing the sect's history and philosophy.

In the first part of this chapter I would analyse the works of Vishwanath Baba and draw their ideological implications. In the latter part I shall take up the works of Bhima Bhoi and Portray him as a radical humanist of 19th century Orissa. In doing so I shall be reflecting the ideas and objectives of Mahima Dharma.

Biswanath Baba (1904-1992):

¹ "Stutichintamani", "Chautisa", "Madhuchakra", "Astaka", "Bihari", "Gita", "Nirveda Sadhana etc. Compiled together in Bhima Bhoi Granthavali. Dharma Grantha Store, Cuttack, 1975.

Biswanath Baba was born in 1904 and joined the order at a very young age. He received the Kaupina at the age of 13 years and in 1925, when he was 21, he was initiated as Balkaldhari Sanyasi. The present form of Balkaldhari group with its strict centralistic organisation was deeply influenced by him.

The real significance of the Baba lies in the fact that he systematized with the teaching of Mahima Dharma for the first time. The purpose of doing so was to remove the 'misunderstandings' regarding Mahima Dharma which have crept into it. He had produced extensive literature on the philosophy of the sect. In this attempt he had 'Sanskritised' the teachings and remodelled them in part vis-a-vis the older texts. His accounts on the sects are not very useful for the construction of the ideology of Mahima Dharma.

His works:

The first major work of Bishwanath Baba, '*Mahima Dharma Pratipadaka*'² has gone a long way to provide an exposition of the basic tenets, rules and regulation of the sect. These works also establish the identity of *Mahima Swami* as God-incarnate. Baba in his effort to give a philosophical basis to the sect's ideas has drawn extensively upon the Srutis and Sastras. Baba has quoted from the sanskritic texts to show that the emergence of the sect is in accordance with the apocalyptic literature of the 'Great Tradition'. This has necessitated a reformulation of the myths associated with the literature of dominant tradition. The text of Baba lacks the

² Baba Bishwanath, "*Mahima Dharma Pratipadaka*" Utkal University Press, (Bhubaneswar-1934).

simplicity of Bhima Bhoi, as his works are addressed to the educated masses belonging particularly to the dominant tradition.

The other important work of Bishwanath Baba is "Satya Mahima Dharma Itihasa."³ The work constitutes five divisions narrating the life and activities of *Guru Mahima Swami*. The thesis also provides a description of the events that followed the Guru's disappearance from earth and the establishment of the ashram at Joranda. An obvious question that emerges in this connection is; *what makes Viswanath Baha to write the history of the sect in the twentieth century?* Baba reveals that, in order to remove the misunderstanding arising out of the publication of some recent literature on the origin and the nature of sect he has taken up the task of writing its history. The reference here is particularly made to N.N. Vasu's theory, that Mahima Dharma is a continuation of an earlier Buddhist tradition⁴ The second theme which Baba addresses is the rejection of the views, which identifies Mahima Swami with an earlier Vaishnava called, Mukunda Das. ⁵

These two questions are of course crucial to the autonomy and identity of Mahima Dharma. Baba has aptly criticised the thin historical basis upon which Vasu has developed his theory. As to the second theme that deals with the identity of 'Mahima Swami' the work refers to the belief among the followers of the sect,

³ Baba Biswanath, "History of Mahima Dharma" Mahima Dharma Alochana Samiti,(Cuttack-1978).

⁴ Vasu, N.N. "Modern Buddhism and its followers in Orissa", (Calcutta - 1911) p. 159-172.

⁵ Hastings,James, "Encyclopaedia of Religion" vol -I (Edinburgh,1959), p.431.

which states that their Guru was not born out of any Woman's womb. Without giving much evidential support to his argument, Baba seems to suggest that any attempt to identify Mahima Swami with ordinary individual will contradict the very basis on which the philosophy of the sect stands.

Another significant motive behind the codification of the history of the sect is connected with the divisions which it had to undergo, in the post -Mahima Swami (post-1876) period. An attempt was made in this work, to legitimise the ordaining of balkal or 'para' status to the 64 saints after the death of the Guru.⁶ The codification of the history of Mahima Dharma serves to provide an official basis of the 64 babas and the 'Balkaldhari ashram' at Joranda as the centre of the sect's activity. This has made the Khaliapalla section of the sect to reject the work of Biswanath Baba.

The last publication of Baba that came before his death was "Philosophy of Mahima Dharma".⁷ Unlike the earlier works this text was translated into English. The fact that the work was translated into English shows the motive of the author to reach a wider audience which includes urban elites and learned men.

⁶ After the death of the Guru, there have been two occasions (1896, 1912) in which the 'bakal' status has been ordained by the highest Sanyasi of the sect. However, during the second occasion a group of 'bakal' sanyasi of the sect led by Kripasindhu Das challenged the authenticity of 'Synya Bani'. They left the Joranda ashrama and formed their own group.

⁷ Baba Biswanath, "Philosophy of Mahima Dharma", tr.S.Das, Mahima Dharma Alochana Samiti (Cuttack-1992).

This works deal with the ideas of the sect on the backdrop of sankritic and vedantic philosophy. In narrating the theory of creation, Biswanath Baba takes into account the Advaitabada of Shankara and the Visistha Advaitabada or Ramanuja.

After comparing these two theories, Viswanath Baba claims that Mahima Dharma philosophy is 'Visuddha- Advaitabada. For *Mahima Dharma* he says, Brahma is Advaita. He is one and the only one and there is no duality or Dvaita. The World he has created is certainly not maya, neither does it have its existence in him only. The worlds has a separate existence but only as Brahma's Mahima or glory. Brahma is by no means limited by his created worlds. He is Satyam, Ganam, Anantam, Ananda, Maya. He is beyond time and space , life and death, all senses, all symbols and all attributes. He is Alekha, Nirguna, Niranjana.⁸

These writings represents Biswanath Baba's effort to "sanskritise" the philosophy of the sect. Does this signify that Baba seeks to establish a philosophical foundation for Mahima Dharma as Sankara or Ramanuja's did for Hindu tradition? Or is it that Baba's aim was to show that its philosophy is no less rich than that of the great tradition? In both the cases, the texts of Baba undermines the spirti and essence of the original ideas of the sect. By sanskritising its ideas, it seems Baba has done a great dis-service to the purpose of the sect, whose base lies among the rural illiterate masses.⁹

⁸ Baba Biswanath, 'Philosophy of Mahima Dharma' Mahima Dharma Alochana Samiti (Cuttack - 1992).

⁹ Das, S., op.cit. p.53.

Bhima Bhoi: A Radical Humanist

It is indeed a difficult task to provide a biographical narrative of Bhima Bhoi, a Dalit poet of 19th Century Orissa only recently his works were published which threw some light on his life and career. But nothing can be definitely said about the exact year of his birth, his parentage and the fact of his blindness. From the available literature it appears that Bhima Bhoi was born at Jatashinga on the border of the Ex-states of Rairakhol and Sonepur sometimes in 1849-50. If Bhima Bhoi composed his first bhajan at the age of sixteen and it was sung in the Mahima Convention of Khuntuni, Dhenkanal in 1865, as observed by Biswanath Baba, the suggested year of his birth must be correct.¹⁰ Whether Bhima Bhoi was born blind has been fiercely debated over the years by many scholars and historians. In the Mahima tradition he is known to be the second and foremost grihastha Sanyasi of Mahima Dharma. It is believed that he was born blind and his eyesight was restored by Mahima Swami, but the former asked the latter to take away his eyesight and grant him poetic insight instead. Thereafter Bhima Bhoi became a genius poet and composed poems for the propagation of teachings of his guru Mahima Swami. If to Dr. Harishchandra Das, Bhima Bhoi was the greatest exponent of Mahima religion, to Nilamani Senapati, he was the first and foremost missionary of the Mahima Cult¹¹.

¹⁰ For details see Nayak, P.M. "Bhima Bhoi: Poet Laureate of Mahima Religion" in West Orissa: A study in Ethos, Sambalpur University, 1992.

¹¹ Panda, D.,(ed.), Mahima Dharma Darshan, DAV College, Koraput, p.17.

Bhima Bhoi died on the 14th day of the dark fortnight of Phalguna in 1895 and was buried on the spot where he had slept. "They bury the dead" writes, B.C.Mazumdar on the customs of the Kumbhipatias, "for they do not believe in the purity of fire. They raise tomb over the interred body of the Guru and light a lamp at the tomb every evening to do honour to him"¹².

What is more important for a historian, is not the biographical details about Bhimo Bhoi but his poems and activities of his life time. In his poems, Bhima Bhoi pitted himself against all the reactionary forces of the time. The consequences were expectedly serious. His cottage was burnt. He was dropped into a well. He was chained and beaten. The Raja of Rairakhol clapped him into jail, and then drove him out into Sangrampur in Sonapur, where he spent a few years cleaning the cowshed and making ropes out of sabai grass.¹³

Bhima Bhoi witnessed the sufferings and the exploitation of the common masses, the gross social disparities between haves and have-nots, brahmins and non-brahmins, landlords, and tenants, money-lenders and insolvent debtors. The devastating famine that visited Orissa in 1866 further widened this yawning chasm between the classes. There was a huge exodus of famine-stricken multitudes from the coastal districts into the Garjat states of Orissa. Therefore, we find in his poetry a deep concern for the victims of the existing unjust and exploitative socio-economic

¹² "Sonepur in the Sambalpur Tract", Appendix.

¹³ Nayak, P.M. op.cit., p.176.

order. He raised his voice against all the social maladies of his times and identified himself with the suffering multitudes.

The degradation of the society, the deprivation of the downtrodden stirred his human anger. It needed supreme courage to go against idolatry and casteism in a brahmin-dominated society, to protest against the ruthless tyranny of kings when their authority was paramount. And yet he stood up:

I shall see which fatherless, child keeps his caste then, Why do you bark?
Have I squandered away the property of your forefathers? This is what they
say, the fallen sinners, the foul-hearted fools, the demons the bone-eaters,
who have turned strong bed-fellows.¹⁴

Bhima Bhoi a devotee of *Mahima* sect directly initiated by the Guru assumes significance as the primary spokesman of the sect. Given the power of literary genius, Bhima Bhoi has written hundreds of poems describing the Guru and his ideas. Written at the time of sect's emergence, these poems constitute the only source of materials on the visions of the sect. Unlike the other texts published by the sect, the works of Bhima Bhoi bears the sanction of the founder of the sect. It is mentioned in the writings of the sect, that the poem dictated by Bhima Bhoi were sent to Joranda, the place where the Guru stayed and they were sung as prayers in the Ashram. Moreover, expressed through colloquial idioms the poems reflect the true sentiments of the followers of the Dharma and the reaction of the people to the dominant tradition. As prayers, the literature of the poet encompasses a picture of devotion, surrender and depiction of sorrows and sufferings of the devotees. In all

¹⁴ For details see, Bhima Bhoi, Stuti Chintamani.

these themes, we can trace, conditions of the people who constitute the part of the subordinate system, their woes, exploitation and attempt to resist the dominant system.

Bhima Bhoi originally wrote his poems on palm leaf. For years, they remained scattered and mostly transmitted through the oral traditions. In the first quarter of twentieth century, his major work 'Stutichintamani' was published, with the preface written by Prof. Artaballava Mohanty.¹⁵ This 'preface' became the centre of controversy in the later years among the members of Mahima society. Moreover there are also many other works of the poet which remained unpublished till then. It is due to the sincere efforts of some sympathisers and the members of the sect that the entire collection of Bhima Bhoi's poetry was published in a Granthabali (collection of works).¹⁶ This Granthabali includes all the major works of the tribal poet such as :- "Stutichintamani", "Bhajanamala", "Chautisa", "Adi-anta Gita", "Nirveda Sadhana", "Astaka bihari Gita", "Padma Kalpa"

Core-issues in the Poems of Bhima Bhoi:

Of all these works, we shall take up the works like "Stutichintamani", "Bhajanamala", "Chautisa", "Adi-anta Gita" and "Nirveda Sadhana" for the purpose of the dissertation. The poems here are deceptively simple and hence our exercise

¹⁵ Mohanty Artaballabha, Preface in "Stutichintamani" Utkal University Press (Bhubaneswar, 1950).

¹⁶ "Bhima Bhoi Granthabali" (ed.), by Sahoo Karunakar, Dharma Grantha Store (Cuttack, 1992).

will be to analyse their meanings carefully to construct the social and moral visions of the sect.

The Social Crisis and the Concept of "Kaliyuga":

On reading the poem of Bhima Bhoi one gathers an impression, that concern for the "Kaliyuga" dominates throughout his work. He suggests that the contemporary society has infringed all norms of human behaviour. There is no more any Dharma i.e, code of civilised conduct left in the individuals. Whether it is king or Brahman all have become sinful. Saints have become materialistic. Their lust for wealth and material pleasures have prevailed over their sense of duty. People who are twice-born have no knowledge of Veda and other holy scriptures. They offer puja without proper meditation. There is not pure men in the society, all have become, morally corrupt. For instance, wives no more show their allegiance to their husbands. They enjoy the friendship of other men. Father has developed lust for his daughter. Brother and sister enjoy conjugal life. There is no respect for Dharma. In the field of politics, the kings have been doing a lot of injustice. They have failed to secure protection for their subjects. Poor and poverty stricken people are being harassed. Exploitation and inequality has become the hall mark of present life. There is no one to look after the poor and destitutes. As a consequence of all these, Gods have left this earth. Fraudulence and falsity has taken place of truth and honesty.¹⁷

¹⁷ For a description of "Kaliyuga" see "Bhajanamala", 3rd and 4th poems, 'Stutichintamani', and also 5th, 7th, 14th, 36th, 82th boli etc.

What do these descriptions on 'Kaliyuga' indicate? What did 'Kalkiavtar' signify? The emphasis attached to this phenomenon reveals an inherent motive behind the writing. Apparently, the analysis serves the purpose of the sect in two ways. Firstly, comprehensive description of the existing society is necessary to prepare the ground of the rise of the sect, which holds promises to save the society from destruction. Secondly, the eminent social decay, which characterizes the prevailing system, offers the reasons for rejecting the system, as well as the dominant order. In both the ways, the motive is to build up an alternative social order, where the ills of the dominant tradition can be done away with. At the same time the narrative also provides a space to express the feeling of exploitation and injustice which prevailed among the people of the subordinate strata. Their resentment towards and rejection of the dominant order, comes through an indirect way, by showing that the existing system has decayed. The actors have failed to meet their role-expectation as per the tradition. Hence the point to be noted here is that the explanation of "Kali-Yuga" is reflective of the "contradictory consciousness".¹⁸ of the lower castes. Based on this general finding we shall work to derive the specific factors against whom the opposition was raised and the manner in which the philosophy of Mahima Dharma served this need.

The often repeated term 'Kali-Yuga' in Bhima Bhoi's writing is an interesting concept. Apparently 'Kali' seems to indicate the felling of moral and social decay

¹⁸ Gramsci Antonio, "Selection from Prison Notebooks" tr. Hoare Quintin and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York-1971), p. 325-345.

of the society. But the term has certainly been used in a more complex way than this. Why should the sect call the contemporary society as 'Kali-Yuga'? And what follows, when the sect narrates that its emergence signifies the Kali-Yuga is going to end soon? These are some of the obvious questions that any critical inquiry into the concept of Kali-Yuga as used in Mahima Dharma literature ought to be taken up.¹⁹

The account of Kali-Yuga is elaborated in a number of Sanskrit works of the third and eighth century A.D. The challenge from shudras and women depicted in them is often conflated now with Buddhist, Tantric and Lokayata tendencies. The theme cropped up in vernacular literature too. Tulsī Das, for instance, talks of Shudras reading the Gita while 'Pandits' suffer, whores flourishing while the 'Satis' (chaste women) starve²⁰

The description of Kali-Yuga in the literatures of dominant tradition, when contrasted with the Bhima Bhoi's idea of 'Kali' reveals certain interesting trends. Apparently, both the categories of literature, agree to the fact that the social order is in jeopardy. The existing social rules and principles are being flouted openly without consideration of morality. However, the commonality between the two texts

¹⁹ Das. S., op.cit., p.56.

²⁰ Sarkar Sumit, "The Kali-Avatar of Bikrampur: A Village scandal in Early Twentieth century Bengal" in Guha, Ranjits "Sub Altern Studies" vol VI, Oxford University Press (Delhi- 1992) p. 1-2.

does not go beyond this. The crux of their difference lies in the perception of the actors who constitute the theme of disorder in the Kali-Yuga.²¹

The focus of the perception of Kali-Yuga in the literature of dominant tradition is on the unruly behaviour of shudras and women. Where as the center of Bhima Bhoi conception of social disorder is the failure of Brahmins and Kings (Kshyastriyas) to stick to their socially prescribed roles. As he wrote in his first poem of Stutichintamani:

"Whether it is Brahman or Prince, all have become evil minded. Why you (Guru) have to think so much? It is you will save all these three worlds".²²
(Stutichintamani, first poem)

Now the question is what makes this difference in the perception of social disorder in these two categories of writing? The answer is certainly located in the different strata of the society from which the literature has evolved. But there is some thing more than a sheer class or caste affiliation that goes behind the perception of 'Kali-Yug'. Our point is Mahima Dharma's account of the social disorder and decay is strategic to the building of its philosophy. By saying that the Brahmins and the kings have become "Mlechha" (impure) by their deeds, the sect tries to reject the notion of differential status on the basis of purity. Their role as social leaders is questioned. What is implicit in this polemics is a notion of equality, that says all individuals are liable to moral decay. Hence, the principle that an

²¹ Das. S., op. cit., p.57.

²² Bhinma Bhoi, "Stutichintamani" in Sahoo K. "Bhima Bhoi's Granthabali", ., Dharma Grantha store (Cuttack - 1992), p.1-2.

individual by virtue of his birth is "Superior" seems illogical. On the contrary, what the sect tries to explain is that, it is one's deeds that makes him pure and closer to the divine, Whether a shudra or a Brahman, all can become 'pure' through true devotion or Bhakti. This provides space for the lower castes to gain social promotion.²³

Anti-Brahmanism and the Notion of Equality:

Bhima Bhoi construed his polemics with great care to pick up his adversaries and deligitimize their claims of social leadership. In this connection, he has been particularly emphatic upon the falling values among Brahmans and Kings. In the 19th poem of Stutichintamani he writes :

"Extreme darkness has surrounded all the three worlds. Even Saints are becoming thieves, as they have developed lust for wealth".²⁴

(19th Poem Stutichintamani)

This contempt for social elites establishes many significant trends about the sect. The specific emphasis on these social leaders is not merely because of their responsibility to hold the moral and social order. Rather, it stresses the fact, that these groups of men have no real rights to assert their superiority over the masses. They are as sinful as that of the subordinate sections of the social hierarchy. In other words Bhima Bhoi makes it clear, that the "theory of "Purity-impurity".²⁵ Which

²³ Das. S., op.cit., p.60.

²⁴ Ibid. pp.38-39.

²⁵ For detail study see, Dumont, Louis, "Homo Hierarchicus : the caste system and its implications" University Chicago Press, (Chicago-1978)

forms the basis for the hierarchical division of the society, is empirically wrong. There is no pure men in this society. All have become corrupt and immoral. Hence, Bhima Bhoi accuses his lord in the 35th poem of Stutichintamani, for having been given him a society of impure individuals.²⁶ Implications of this premise, ensures that the sect is more particular in deligitimizing the authority of the dominant system.

Extending the attack on Brahminical authority, the sect challenged the principles of twice-born or 'Dvija', the notion which forms the major basis for social division in the dominant tradition. The three upper castes of Hindu society, such as Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaishya holds the status of purity being 'twice-born'. The Shudras and Chandalas who belong to the rest of the society are to serve and obey these three castes. The status of purity is attributed to the individual on the basis of his birth, in the particle varna. Bhima Bhoi objected to this ascriptive notions of varna system. In the 5th poem of the "Stutichintamani" he writes.

"Being twice-born you do not perform the rituals and have not knowledge about the veda. Meditate thrice a day without the prayer"²⁷
(5th poem Stutichintamani)

This exposes the hallowness of the purity status attached to the twice-borns. The system that gives status in the society, on the basis of birth in a particular caste, is rejected. By doing this, the sect opens the way for the lower castes to gain social status through acts of purity.

²⁶ Bhima Bhoi, "Suchintamani" p.70-71.

²⁷ Ibid p.10-11.

Thus, there is a dual movement, one, that rejects the authority of the twice-born castes, secondly the polemic opens avenues for social promotion for the lower castes.

The important religious texts of Hinduism, from the Vedas and the Upanisads to the numerous version of the Puranas, did of course play a part in underpinning contemporary religious practices and the authority of the upper caste. However, this process of legitimation did not consist of a fairly consistent and comprehensive a set of moral norms and prohibitions, which were to be taken to heart by every member of the faithful, and translated into practice in every day life. Their familiarity with the puranic tales of popular Hinduism was limited to what they could gather from local oral traditions. It was not so much the content of Hindu religious writings that were important in the legitimation of social hierarchies. The religious division of social groups in caste was referred to deferent level of religious purity, and one signs of this purity was accesses to the most sacred religious texts. It was an inherent part of Brahman religious privilege to be able to repeat parts of the vedas; a Brahman's contact with the vedas, spoken by the Brahman himself represented an important part of his religious power over lower castes which was denied such access.²⁸ Mahima Dharma perceived the structural weakness in the system which assures Brahminical authority. It challenged both the authority of the religious literature and the power derived form the selective access to it by the Brahmins.

²⁸ For details see, Hanlon, Rosalind: "Caste, Conflict and Ideology" Cambridge University Press, (London-1985) p. 146-147.

The other point of attack on the sacred literature, was related to the authenticity of their authority. In the 'Nirveda Sadhana' Bhima Bhoi extends his argument, convening people why not to read Veda? Explaining the sect's version of cosmology, he argues, that the Vedas deals with the void or the 'Mahashunya' but contains nothing about 'Mahanitya'²⁹ which is the abode of 'Anadi' or Supreme. This 'Anadi' or supreme is the creator of all other important Hindu Gods such as :- Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva etc. whose abode is Mahashunija. The vedas therefore, provides a 'partial explanation' of the cosmology and does not deal with the highest authority. Mahima Dharma on the contrary centers its ideas on the 'Anadi'. This makes it "Nirveda Sadhana' or contemplation beyond veda. The sentiments of practising the faith of a higher authority helps the sect to reject the dominant tradition and also to raise philosophical support to its own values.³⁰

This projection of religious texts is based on the conviction that traditionally the Hindu sacred texts have been a source of social control to deny the authority of these texts in consequence, amounts to the rejection of the society and the existing norms that operates within its realm. Why should a sect defy the social norms? The clue perhaps lies in its vision of the society. A social order which thrives to protect the interest of the upper castes, cannot accept any concept of change that, seeks to withdraw the privileges attached to its leaders. Therefore to achieve the social

²⁹ See Bhima Bhoi, "Nirveda Sadhna" in Sahoo K., "Bhima Bhoi's Granthabali", Dharma Grantha Store (Cuttak-1978) p.10-11.

³⁰ Das., S., op.cit, p.61.

change that the sect professes, an alternative order is inevitable. This vision necessarily involves the repudiation of the social norms created and sustained by the religious literatures of the dominant tradition and at the same time evolution of a set of alternative norms based on the conception of an egalitarian society.³¹

This shift in this regard was reflected, in the term 'Nirveda sadhna' which Bhima Bhoi uses alternatively for the sect. In many of his poems, Bhima Bhai describes the sect as 'nirveda dharma' or a religion based on nirveda. The use of the term 'Nirveda'; is rather ambiguous. Because no Hindu would call his religion as 'veda'. Veda is a holy book and cannot be a synonymous term for the 'religion'. Hence it appears is that Bhima Bhoi's emphatic use of the term 'nirveda' to explain the nature of the sect is purposive and the purpose perhaps could be located in the social hierarchy based on the vedic sanctions. The opposition to the social division and particularly the Brahminical authority, is expressed by specifically describing the sect as 'Nirveda'. In this sense, Mahima Dharma, claims that its community, does not recognise the traditional social division on the lines of vedic philosophy.³²

Bhima Bhoi writes 92nd poem of "Stutichintamani".

"The men and women belonging to all the thirty six castes and fifty-two subcastes". Irrespective of his and low, surrender yourself to "Nama" (Of Alekh)

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid p.62.

Thus Mahima Dharma's alternative conception of society is open to all castes and there is no discrimination on the basis of varna criteria. This argument reflects the motive for building up an egalitarian order, opposed to Brahmanical ideals of stratified society based on caste division.

What is the philosophical basis of this alternative order or how does the sect justify this egalitarian notion, which constitutes the crux of its moral vision? To my mind, this philosophical requirements is met firstly by the principles of 'monotheism' or 'one God which is supported the sect's perception of "Creation" or "Consomology". Secondly, by the Concept 'Avatara' or incarnation of God is depicted in a manner that would help in rejecting the 'Hindu Gods' and the theory of varna system associated with it.

Monotheism:

The principle of monotheism or the idea of 'One God' is common to most of the reform movements of Hindu society. This is because it becomes logical to derive a theory of equality of rights for all individuals on the ground that all of them worship the same God who has created them.³³ Here, there is no question of 'Superior Creation' and differential access to the God. In the situations, where social exploration and discontentment matures into protest or dissenting movement, the

³³ In this respect Bhima Bhoi echod Keshab Chandra Sen who advocated the stressed principle of 'monotheism' by assuming the 'fatherhood of God' thereby the 'brotherhood of men' (as euqal) in the 19th century under the Brahmo movement.

concept 'One God' often taken recourse to challenge the social inequality based on religious sanctions.

Mahima Dharma has shown a great philosophical understanding and intellectual manouvering to explain its concept of theism. The sect's concept of "One god" is derived and based upon its theory of cosmology. Bhima Bhoi narrates the sect's idea of creation' in the 78th "Stutichintamani". He writes :

"From the nameless Un-Written Brahma Which is the embodiment of silence, Void was bon. From the existence of this great void. Space and sky were created.

From Anama were created fire, air, and water being expressed in three different gunas like sattava, rajas and tamasa. From Anama moon, sun were born, to cause day and night. Because sun rises and sets in the sky, its called 'crown of the Day' : From Anama Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva created when this Universe was not there, they remained in the laps of formless. This soil, stone all created from Anama resulting in the formation of earth. Fifty six crores of organisms are born and taken care of by Anama".

(Stutichintamani, 78th boli)

What follows from a careful reading of this exposition of cosmology in Mahima Dharma is that all the major divine characters of brahminical system owes their origin to the 'Anama' (a devine being whose incarnation is believed to be Alekh Swami). As we demythify this theory of cosmology as described by Bhima Bhoi, we come to the point that Guru of the sect is of supreme divine character. His discourses are more authoritative and ought to be followed, even if it denies the Brahminical practices and beliefs. As the displacement of divine authority takes place, the cultural hegemony of the dominant tradition is bound to collapse. The men at the receiving end of the tradition then would transcend the cultural and social barriers to assert themselves in a positive fashion.

The Notion of Anti-idolworship

A logical fallout of the sect's views on cosmology is the conception of "anti-idolworship". Since, Alekh Swami, the human form of 'Supreme' has taken abode in this place, there is no use of worshipping the idols who wields authority only as his subordinate. This makes the sect to reject idol-worship and the rituals associated with it. Bhima Bhoi wrote in "Stutichintamani".

"Now listen and see, the astonishing story of Vaishnava will all the idols of Gods and Goddess be buried now"?

(23rd boli of Stutichintamani)

The anti idol-worship theme in Mahima Dharma's scheme of alternative society has definitely a significant role to play. In the religious sphere, this conception rules out any medium or priesthoodship of brahmins in particular. The consequential effect of this change alters the whole pattern of cultural and economic framework of the society. Culturally the brahmins are deprived of the special role to act as agencies through which people can seek the divine blessings. The non-brahmins are no longer under religious obligation to follow the brahminical discourses. The social status then attached to the brahmins is stripped off. The economic consequence comes in the shape of deligitimation of the properties attached to the temples and sacred institutions. The brahmins who mostly enjoyed these properties of divine institution as reward to the service rendered by them would now loose it.³⁴

³⁴ Das., S., op. cit., p.70.

The Concept of 'Avatar':

The other conception which support Mahima Dharma's claim for building an alternative moral order is the concept of 'Avatara'. The Hindu belief that the divine takes various incarnation in different times has given way to the concept 'Avatara'. This principle, works as a legitimising force for the different Hindu gods. In 'Stutichintamani, Bhima Bhoi's narration of 'Avataras' goes according to the Hindu accounts, representing the first six incarnations usually as :- Matsya, (The Fish); Kurma, (The Tortoise); Varah (the Boar); Narasimha, (The Man-lion); Vaman (the Dwarf), Rama and the Krishna.³⁵ As to the present era, Bhima Bhoi says, the 'Supreme God' has taken the incarnation of Mahima Swami to restore order and truth. He writes in the 10th poem of "Stutichintamani" :-

"Lot of exploitation is going on this three worlds, four Dharmas have degenerated. It is believed, Kaliki-Avatara has taken incarnation of Vaishnava. No human being could get the pleasure of prayer. Mahima initiated one-lettered nama, which has become famous all over the Universe".³⁶

(10th boli Stutichintamani)

This indicates that the sect instead of totally rejecting the dominant tradition reformulates its theme to set its claim for legitimacy. In the dominant tradition of Orissa, Jagannath is believed to be the last incarnation, who shall take up the "Kali-Avatar" in future to restore order in the Kaliyuga (contemporary society). Mahima

³⁵ Biswanath Baba, "The Philosophy of Mahima Dharma" Mahima Dharma Alochna Samiti, (Cuttuck-1992), pp. 19-20.

³⁶ Ibid p.20.

Dharma's conception of 'Avatara', does not reject Jagannath as a incarnation of the Vishnu. But it says that, there has been another incarnation in the form of Mahima Swami, which makes it clear that the period of Jagannath is over. The 'Supreme Lord' is no more present in the idol of Jagannath. As Bhima Bhoi writes in "Nirveda Sadhana":-

"Says, Anadi Purusha. He is Jagannath Dasa. He stays in the highest temple (Puru temple). He is the human incarnation of Lord Vishnu's idol. When I became aware. He left his sixty types of Bhoga and followed me alone with devotion. Worship my name. Throughout day and night, he has been praying and appealing under my feet".³⁷

(Nirveda Sadhana)

Jagannath's initiation into the sect, and benevolent acceptance of Guru's authority establishes some serious implications. Instead of reacting or challenging the authority of Jagannath, the sect tries to appropriate the Cult. The propelling logic behind such an approach could be attributed to the conviction that the sect seeks to follow a philosophically persuasive method to attract the people of the Great Tradition to its own fold. Secondly, the myth is intended to instill confidence among the sect's followers for causing a large scale transfer of loyalties from the dominant system.

This conception also reveals that the sect sought for a displacement of the authority from Jagannath to Mahima Swami. One obvious implication of this argument is that, the dominant tradition and the authority which its' elites enjoy are

³⁷ Bhoi Bhoi, "Stuti Chintamani", pp.163-164.

deligitimised. Since, Jagannath, who is center of this tradition becomes a follower of Mahima Swami, the systemic notions of its cult does not hold good.

A purpose common to the philosophies of the dissenting traditions is the 'notion' of identity and integration among its members. These identities form the ideological background to the competing attempts of the protest movements against that of the dominant traditions at all levels of the society. This process of evolving a new identity, sets the sect apart from earlier lineages or geneological associations. For instance, in the Mahima society, the moment an individual is initiated into sect, he is given a new name and is supposed not to reveal his parental or caste identity ever in his life.³⁸

This conception of forming a new identity, has strategic significance for the sect's ideology and vision. On the one hand, the 'new identity' helps in the abandonment of the caste associations inherited from the dominant traditions. On the other hand, a new identity for the followers of the sect, becomes a catalyst for facilitating integration within them. As an effort to ensure such an integration within the sect, Bhima Bhoi writes in the Stutichintamani :-

"All the devotees of Alekh are One, there is no duality or trinity among them. Fifty-six crores of lives to in one. All of them take His shelter."³⁹

(82nd boli)

³⁸ Das. S., op.cit., p.72.

³⁹ Ibid.

This poem reveals the feeling of oneness which constitutes the crux of sect's social constructions. The forces of integration among the members of Mahima Society apparently operates on religious level. But the purpose which this unity seeks to achieve is social and political in nature.

Mahima Dharma has made the task of achieving salvation easier and very much within the material and spiritual limits of human beings. Thus, the lower caste men of impure status can achieve purity, if they take up the worship of 'Alekh'. By ascribing its followers, a religious and social status that is co-equal with that of the upper caste Hindus, Mahima Dharma ensures them freedom from the social control of Brahmans and other dominant castes.

Women Issues

Another significant aspect of Mahima Dharma's social revolution was to aid women's liberation. The depth of feeling on the matter was great enough that Bhima Bhoi has to devote one of his works to explain the sect's attitude towards women. The central focus of the work was on the formation of a new and equal husband - wife relationship; aiming at breaking down the old authority structure in the family. He argued that as long as if there was inequality in the family, there could be no true quality in the society. Suppression of women, in traditional Hindu culture, went hand in hand with suppression of lower castes and untouchables.

These ideas of women's liberation are inherent in the philosophical expressions of the sect. Contained in Bhima Bhoi's work "Adi Anta Gita"⁴⁰. This

⁴⁰ Bhoi Bhima, "Adi-anta Gita" in Sahoo K. in "Granthabali"

is in a form dialogue between 'Shakti' or 'Jiva' (Female) and 'Purusha' (Male). The poet has given a symbolic expression of Purusha to male and 'Jiva' or 'Shakti' to the female. The interdependence between the two has been regarded as indispensable to achieve liberation. Another significant revelation which Bhima Bhoi makes in regard in regard to the women's liberation is that the body of a female is a representative of several Gods and saints in her different parts. This explanation, helps in attributing purity status to the female at par with their male counterpart.

The sect's perception of women's position and status is truly revolutionary. Because, in the 19th century when social life was under the absolute control of conservative forces it required a great change of attitude and popular will to regard women at par with men. Mahima Dahrma as revealed by its followers, opposed the evil practices concerning women exploitation such as: Sati, widow-remarriage, female infanticide etc. In fact it is said that Bhima Bhoi himself married a widow.⁴¹ The sect's approach to the women helped in attracting a great number of them into its fold. This met with severe brahminical resistance. Bhima Bhoi explains this in the 63rd poem of Stutichintamani :

"Influencing other's daughter and bride he (Bhima Bhoi) has made his own wife. Kings and people allege, that he maintains family life, yet claims himself to be a Guru".⁴²

(Stutichintamani)

⁴¹ Bhima Bhoi "Sarala Sahitya Sansad", Bhubanewar, 1997, p.296.

⁴² Bhoi Bhima, "Stutichintamani" pp.125-126.

A major theme in Bhoi's writing is the expression of anguish and agony of the followers of the sect that suffered from physical and mental harassment at the hands of the members of the upper-castes. What made the brahmins and other social elites of the dominant tradition to become so critical on the sect and its members? The answer of course lies in the anti-caste, anti-idolworship sentiments of the Mahima Dharma that struck the system which sustained the brahminical legitimacy. It is however, just not the philosophy of the sect which worried the Brahmins. More important was the strategy and the area of operation which the sect followed in propagating its ideas. While the missionary forces which were conspicuous by their western ideals were easily dealt with as something that is foreign and prompting cultural support for the political control of the country. In fact, a common dislike for the foreigners linked with the subjugated status of the country prevented the missionary forces to make major in-roads into the Hindu society. The Mahima Dharma in this context was a movement offering criticism within the tradition. Its influence and control over the masses was naturally more than the missionary or new-reform movements. In keeping with this logic, we find the Dharma's influence spread more in the rural and interior areas of Orissa than that of the urban population. Its unsophisticated oral tradition captured the minds of illiterate rural masses more effectively than that of other similar movements.

This analysis infact suggests, why the brahminical system would denounce the sect? The major criticism from the brahmins was that the ideas of the sect are

alien to our culture influenced by Christian missionaries. Bhima Bhoi explained this in stutichintamani, as he wrote :

"People are childing at us, calling us Christians. Swami, you are the witness. Just for Alek there is such jarring misery"⁴³

(20th boli of Stutichintamani)

This expression reveals, that Brahmans denounced that sect as an upsurge of Christianity, which would make the members of the sect impure, as per the Hindu tradition and would ultimately result in social ostracism.

There was yet another mode of resistance which came from the kings and Brahmins. This argument was aimed at criticising the apocalyptic claims of Mahima Dharma. The theory that 'Kali-Yuga' will end and all evil forces will be destroyed by supernatural powers of Mahima Swami was challenged at an empirical level. The beliefs that Mahima Swami as an incarnation of god in the form of 'Kalki Avatar' did of course posed a threat to the network of brahminical value system and authority evolving from it. This made the brahmins and kings to question the notions on which authority of Mahima Swami rested.

The anguish of the sect against those who oppose Mahimaities is evident in poems of Bhima Bhoi. The apocalyptic fashion of its expression serves the sect by building confidence among the followers of the sect. Secondly, this also meant to evoke apprehensions in the minds of their oppnents. The strategy therefore is clear, that the sect envisioned that the brahminical oppression can be met with apocalyptic threats of destruction, which promised to eliminate the forces critical about the sect.

⁴³ Ibid pp.39-40.

The sect's philosophy however, goes beyond the goal of a simple anti-caste or anti-Brahmin movement. It sought to establish an alternative order with values that would encompass the whole society. This necessarily transcends the caste or class interest to seek the good of the whole humanity. Thus Bhima Bhoi wrote, in the 27th boli of the Stutichintamani

,"Praninka arata dukha apramita dekhu dekhu keba sahu.

Mojibana pache narke padithau jagata uddhara heu"⁴⁴.

"Who can tolerate the sufferings and the pains of human beings? Let my life, O'Lord parish in my life let the world be liberated".

(Translated)

To sum up, the visions of Mahima Society was essentially an attempt to meet the weaknesses of the existing Brahminical Hindu Society. The principles of the dominant system such as: purity-impurity, distinctions among the individuals, differential access to religious scriptures and knowledge, priesthoodship as a medium to reach God are either modified or subverted by Mahima Dharma's philosophy. In all its philosophical constructions the goal is to attain an egalitarian order based on ascriptive values. The moral and religious notions of the sect reveals a conception of an alternative society and an order of social life, that represents the subaltern sentiments. The sect's ideas may not have been all that consistent logically, but the visionary precepts of its ideas can hardly be undermined, in any serious enquiry into the Indian society.

⁴⁴ Ibid p. 53. - 54.

CHAPTER – V
CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

This work on Mahima Dharma vindicates the notion that there existed elements of protest and dissent in the Indian intellectual tradition against the anomalous, outdated and exploitative practices of socio religious order of the 18th and 19th century India. Mahima Dharma was an illustration of the attempts made in the 19th century India at various places to revive and reform Hinduism 'from within'. It reveals a significant degree of discontent and attitudes of religious protest against Brahmanical tradition. The sect's precepts and practices reflected its objective of building an alternative social order to that of the dominant Jagannath cult. This is evident in the poetic outputs of Bhima Bhoi, the intellectual preceptor.

By a careful reformulation of the myths and symbols, the sect purposefully tried to evolve a set of social and spiritual ideals that rejected the existing dominant value system. As an autochthonous social-cultural protest movement Mahima Dharma's philosophical position may not be all that consistent logically, yet the vision of a society to which it subscribed revealed the strength of its philosophical understanding.¹

Mahima Dharma did not emerge in vacuum. It had its roots, in the socio-economic and cultural formation of pre-colonial Orissa. Its emergence and growth in the historical specificity of 19th century Orissa is associated with number of factors. The policies of the colonial state which strengthened the existing inequalities and backwardness, the traditional cultural hegemony that fostered the system of subordination through the Jagannath cult, the post-famine (1866) developments which increased the sense of deprivations among the lower sections of the society are some of the major factors for emergence of a dissenting tradition as Mahima Dharma.

¹ Das, S. Mahima Dharma, Arya Prakashan, Cuttuck, 1997, p.31.

Though it apparently seemed religious and moralistic in content, it did in fact cut into the social and political system that sustained the subordination. Another parallel was the sect like kujibara Mahtha which shared the philosophical and ideological stance of Mahima Dharma.

A historiographical narrative on the issues like the identity of the founder and the nature of the sect reveals that Mahima Dharma made a deliberate attempt to build an alternative order to the Jagannath Dharma. A conspicuous attempt was made to organize the people who had remained at the receiving end of the old value system through a new – value system. The historiography further indicates that the founder of the sect has been attributed with a mythical tradition that would ensure itself a platform from where it can effectively challenge the system of dominance inherent within the Jagannath cult.²

In the mythical tradition of Mahima Dharma we find an attempt by the sect to unite under its spiritual fold all the major religious and cultural elements of contemporary Orissa. By portraying Jagannath as a follower and disciple of Mahima Swami the sect tried to subordinate the dominant tradition to its own moral and philosophical ideas. The myths depicting the subordinate status of Jagannath cult, signifies that the sect emerged in opposition to the cultural hegemony enjoyed by the cult. Thus the sect tried to displace the authority of the Jagannath cult and the system of Brahmanical orthodoxy linked to it.

The establishment of an egalitarian, casteless social order seems to be the crux of Mahima Dharma's social vision. By devaluing the 'notion of Purity' associated

² For a detail study of the role of myths in organizing lower caste dissent see, Hanlon, O'Rosalind, "Caste, conflict and Ideology, CUP, London, 1982 and Dube, Saurav, "Myths Symbols and Rituals of Chatisgarh Satnamis" in Subaltern Studies, vol.VI, OUP, 1992, Delhi .

with the upper castes and especially the Brahmins Mahima Dharma tried to visualize symbolic order where all would have equal access to god. In this context it seem that the polemicists of Mahima Dharma were somewhat closer to the ideas put forward by Louis Dumont.

“It is clear that the impurity of the untouchables is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahmin...in particular, untouchability will not truly disappear until the purity of the Brahmin is radically devalued.”³

In the 19th century the main focus of all social and religious reform movements was the man. Mahima movement was no exception. There is no consideration of caste, creed, colour, occupation, social status for admission into the Mahima faith.

Mahima movement championed the cause of the oppressed and down-trodden section of the society and it denounced the evil practices such as the casteism, idolatry and the priesthood of the Brahmins.

Mahima Dharma kindled new hope in the minds of lower caste Hindus who could aspire to find salvation in their own traditional system in a simple way in which there was no elaborate ritualism or the predominance of the priests. This was the main reason of its popularity among the lower caste and lower class people in Orissa, especially in the western hinterland.

The introduction of inexpensive ceremonies like marriage, funeral rites, ceremonies of children, entry into new houses elevation of the position of women.

³ Quoted in, Omvedt, Gail, “Cultural Conflict in a Colonial Society” (Bombay, 1976), p.38.

condemnation of social evils like sati, child marriage, infanticide (meriah system) were some of the reforms pioneered by this movement.⁴

Mahima Dharma never tried to forcibly convert anyone to its fold. It was the most liberal in this respect. It could not attract a large number of followers by offering them financial and material benefits. This was perhaps why it slowly progressed and did not acquire a very large number of followers. However, the sect had a significant number of followers.

“One God, one religion, one caste” seems to be the ideal of Mahima movement. Whatever the movement did was prompted by a vision, the vision of a new society and new life.

⁴ Chinara, S.H. "Impact of the Alekha Cult" - Cultural Heritage of Orissa Vol. I CAS, Bhubaneswar 1984 p.89.

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GLOSSARY OF USEFUL TERMS

Alekh	:	that can not be described in writing
Anadi	:	the one without end (the supreme being)
Anama	:	nameless
Apara Sanyasi	:	a monk of the Mahima order in it's imperfect stage of monkhood.
Ashram	:	a monastery
Avatar	:	an incarnation
Baba	:	a monk of the Mahima cult
Bairagi	:	a newly initiated Mahima sanyasi
Balkaldhari	:	a para sanyasi or a Khumbhi patia who wears bark
Balyalila	:	a religious ceremony of Mahima Dharma in which sweets or coconut are distributed among the children. (Literally meaning 'children's play')
Bhajan	:	devotional songs in the praise of God.
Bhoga	:	the sacred food offered to the god
Brahma Vivaha	:	the marriage ceremony conducted by Mahima rules
Chandala	:	an untouchable
Chaupadhi	:	a small monastery
Darsana	:	a religious custom of praying facing towards the west before the sun set
Dharma	:	religion

Dhuni	:	sacred fire
Diksa	:	initiation ceremony of the monks
Duni mandira	:	the temple in which the sacred fire is kept
Gadi Mandira	:	the burial temple of Mahima Swami at Joranda.
Garjat	:	a feudatory state
Granthavali	:	a collection of works
Grihastya	:	a householder Mahima follower
Guru Purnima	:	the most important festival of the Mahima cult (death anniversary of Mahima Swami) celebrated in the month of February
Guru	:	spiritual guide.
Kaliyug	:	a mythical era representing contemporary period in which the society is in jeopardy
Kalki avatar	:	a future incarnation in the kali - era
Karan	:	a scribe caste in Orissa
Kaupunidhari	:	the Mahima monk who wears red achere dyed loin-cloth.
Khandayat	:	a intermediary caste of agriculturists of Orissa
Kirtana	:	singing songs with musical instruments in the name of the god.
Kumbhipatia	:	a Mahima monk who wears the bark of Kumbhi tree
Lokayat	:	a heterodox sect which believed in materialism.
Maha sunya	:	great void
Matha	:	a small religious centre
Nirguna	:	attributeless

Niti	:	a religious custom of sweeping the monastery of the Mahima order by senior monks
Panchasakha	:	a medieval school of Vaishnavism in Orissa represented by 'five friends', who were all poets
Para sanyasi	:	Perfect stage of Sanyasahood in Mahima Dharma, or a Khumbhipatia is also called so
Pujá	:	worship
Purnima	:	full moon day
Sanyasi	:	a monk or mendicant
Sarana	:	a religious custom among the Mahimaites who pray facing towards the east in the early morning.
Sati	:	a chaste woman
Satsangh Goshthi	:	common feast among the Mahima followers
Siddha	:	a perfect yogi (monk)
Sunya	:	void
Tungi	:	a small thatched house meant for prayer, singing and religious discourse.
Visuddha-advaitabada:		the philosophy pure monism