

The Impact of Mahima Dharma on Socio-Religious Life of Rural Odisha

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Abstract

This paper examines Mahima Dharma: an indigenous religious movement in Odisha state, its influence on the socio-religious life of rural population. The movement, which emerged in the late 18th century under the leadership of Mahima Swami and was preached by mystic poet Bhima Bhoi, criticized ritual orthodoxy, caste discrimination and the rule of Brahmanical authority. It supported the formless, all-pervasive God (Sunya Brahma), moral living, plain living and spiritual equality. The key purpose of the study is to examine the process of Mahima Dharma reshaping the religious life of the rural Odisha, social orders, and group thinking based on its egalitarianism ideology and literary religious texts written in vernacular languages. The paper also explores the role of local rituals, oral traditions and community spaces in relation to maintaining the movement. This study attempts to evaluate Mahima Dharma not only as a spiritual movement but as a grass root socio-religious upheaval, using the historical evidence, textual interpretation, as well as ethnographic understanding. It makes a durable case about the sustainability of the movement over the years in raising social exclusion related issues, especially among the Dalits and Adivasis, and provides a case study detailing the ways indigenous religiosity can be used as a means of social empowerment and as a means of ethical resistance among the rural Indian populace.

Keywords: Sunnya Purusha, Sarana, Darshana, Mahima Maha Meru, Maha mahi Mandal, Sadguru, Gruhi Sannyasi, Bhekabana.

1. Introduction

In what follows, I would like to discuss about Mahima Dharma which is considered to be indigenous religion of Odisha. Prof. Satrugana Nath and Prof. Chittaranjan Das who are well known researchers on Mahima Dharma consider it to be Odisha's original contribution to the world. Some consider it to be a movement within Hindu fold. Mahima Dharma flourished in Odisha in between late 18th century and early 19th century. Like every religion, its Founder is a saint called Mahima Swami or Mahima Gosain, who came from the Himalayas and reached Puri. Some call him "Dhulia Baba". As he was taking only water to sustain, he was called as "Nirahari Baba" because he was rolling on the ground.¹ He could not tolerate the egoistic and rough behavior of priests (*Pandas*) in the Jagannath Temple, expounded the strong argument for *Advaita Vada* (monism) and defeated the *pandas* in *Mukti Mandap*. Gradually

moved on to Khandagiri (Andharua), Daruthenga (Baranga), Malabeharpur (Athgarh- on the bank of Ansupa), Khuntuni (near Athgarh) and lastly reached on the hill top of the Kapilas where he engaged in *Atma Yogo Samadhi* for twenty-one years by taking fruits and milk only. As the story runs, the then king of Dhenkanal, Bhramarabara was taking care for his daily foods like milk etc. when baba was engaged in deep meditation. After the *Siddhi*, Govinda baba becomes his first disciple. Both Mahima Gosain Swamy and Govinda Baba came to house of Bhima Bhoi to initiate him as a disciple. Mahima Gosain, blessed blind Bhima Bhoi with eyesight but later on Bhima preferred to be blind again since he could not tolerate the miseries and sorrows of mankind. Thus, Bhima became the second disciple of Mahima Swamy who was directed to spread the new religion called “Mahima Dharma”. By the grace of Mahima Swamy, the internal eye (*Divya-Caksu*) of Bhima opened and he started composing poems (*Bhajans/Cautisas*) in local language in the form of prayers. It is said that the composition of poems was noted down in palm-leaf by four scribes like Hari Panda, Basu Panda etc. and after due permission from Mahima Swami these compositions were sung in lyrical way with musical instruments like “khanjani” and “gini”. Bhima’s poems became popular and started spreading in nook and corner of Odisha. Bhima was gaining popularity gradually. Thus, the founder of Mahima Dharma is Prabuddha Swamy and Bhima Bhoi is the propagator of Mahima Dharma. Another follower of Mahima Dharma is Biswanath Baba who tried to establish Mahima Dharma on the basis of what he termed as “*Bisudhadaita Vada*”. The two propagators, Biswanath Baba and Bhima Bhoi aimed at spreading and propagating Mahima Dharma but from different angles. While Biswanath Baba tries to establish Mahima Dharma as Visushadvaita Veda with the established scriptures, Bhima Bhoi with heart touching *Bhajans* and *Cautisas*. Bhima Bhoi is famous for his Magnum Opus “*Stuti Chitamani*”. In what follows, I will delimit my discussion only on Bhima Bhoi and the central theme of Mahima Dharma in nutshell.²

2. Background of the Research

One of the most important indigenous religious movements, which arose in Odisha in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, is Mahima Dharma. It arose in the socio-cultural environment of the rural Odisha out of reaction to the highly institutionalized caste segregation, ritualism and orthodoxy, and the Brahmanical dominance over religious life. It was started by Mahima Swami, also called Mahima Gosain and Dhulia Baba who did not believe in idol worship and propagated the idea of Sunya Brahma, an all-pervading formless god like concept. His teachings were characterized with asceticism, non-possession, and a moral lifestyle.

The most important person to cause the movement was Bhima Bhoi, who was a blind tribal poet and follower of Mahima Swami. In his spiritually and emotionally intense poetry written in local Odia language, Bhima Bhoi brought the central tenets of Mahima Dharma to masses. His writings and above all *Stuti Chintamani* showed compassion on the sufferings of mankind and dreamt about a just and equal spiritual order. The egalitarian, anti-scriptural, transmissive nature of Mahima Dharma was particularly attractive to Dalits, Adivas and the rural poor who remained on the outside of mainstream Hinduism. Mahima Dharma is underrepresented in the academic discourse in spite of its wide influence in Odisha. This research aims to examine its influence on the socio-religious life of rural communities, its development history, as well as the way it became a platform of spiritual enlightenment and social mobilization of the disadvantaged groups in colonial and post-colonial Odisha.

3. Literature review

The **Review of Literature** has been explained the very effective manner in the subject of the objectives

1. *Satrughana Nath* (2004), in *Mahima Dharma: Eka Adhyayana*, gives an analytical survey of existence of Mahima Dharma as the local religious movement in Odisha. He examines the life of Mahima Swami and the orientation of his doctrine in the scope of anti-Brahmanical reform. Nath points out that the spiritual and social effect of Mahima Dharma should be conceived as the revolt against the caste and ritual subjection in rural Odisha.
2. *Chittaranjan Das* (2009) in *Bhima Bhoi: A Visionary of Mahima Dharma* traces the work of Bhima Bhoi in the shaping of Mahima Dharma in his devotional literature. Das emphasizes the spiritual philosophy of the poet and his emotional plea that spoke out on the cause of the disadvantaged groups. He contextualizes Bhima Bhoi in the context of the Dalit liberation and vernacular mysticism in colonial India.
3. *Jatindra Mohan Mohanty* (1997) in *Odia Dharmika Andolana* makes the argument that Mahima Dharma was a subaltern spiritual insurrection. He compares and contrasts Mahima Dharma with other Indian reform movements of the 19th century, but adds that it had a rural foundation, an absence of scriptural authority and reliance on oral transmission of spiritual sayings.
4. *Kailash Chandra Dash* (2013) in his article *Mahima Dharma in Colonial Odisha* examines the way Mahima Dharma defied Hindu orthodoxy as well as colonial spying. Dash states that although the British interpreted it as a non-political sect, its analysis of the castes, and state patronized temple institutions, quietly opposed the colonial and feudal system.
5. *B.P. Sahu* (2010) in *Religion and Society in Odisha* talks about the socio religious issues between the tribal and the lower cast communities of the Odisha state. He remarks that anti-idolatrous Mahima Dharma and its egalitarianism appealed to back country folk who were deemed non-mainstream Hindus as elitist and suppressive.
6. *Nivedita Mohanty* (2006) in *Folk Religion and Popular Culture of Odisha* centers on the way Mahima Dharma became a part of the rural Odisha folk traditions. She discusses the ways through which it managed to transform into the local culture and oral tradition of the native population of the region where it expanded.
7. *M.M. Kalapahad* (2002) in *Dharma o Darshana* puts Mahima Dharma in dialogue with Advaita Vedanta. He asserts that although such characteristics in the movement are monistic, they differed in demanding ethical existence instead of speculating metaphysically, and thereby, the movement is strongly used to the lived realities of people in rural Odisha.
8. *P.K. Samal* (1995) in *Social Movements in Odisha* examines as a grass roots religious movement Mahima Dharma. Samal discusses the contributions of ashrams and sannyasis in the propagation of Dharma and also in the spiritual and social nourishment of communities that were left isolated due to the constraints of caste system and poverty.
9. *Sushanta Kumar Panigrahi* (2012) in *Tribal Religion and Resistance* locates Mahima Dharma into the wider context of tribal resistance. He states that the religion articulated Adivasi hopes and their identity through the formation of a non-Sanskritic and non-ritualistic path of the spiritual life based on equality and dignity.
10. *T.K. Oommen* (2001) in *Religion and Society in India* cites the example of Mahima Dharma, which is a protest religion sprouted because of the social injustice. To Oommen, it is spiritual and also

reformist in that it has undermined and mitigated the hegemony by challenging the major religious discourse and providing the oppressed with a universal world view.

11. *Raghunath Rath* (1999) in *Bhima Bhoi o Tanka Rachana* gives a literary-critical evaluation of the poetry of Bhima Bhoi. Rath discusses the poetic shimmer and metaphysical resonance of Bhima Stuti Chintamani by asserting that it is a landmark of Oriya devotional literature that combines the mystical self-discovery with the artistic critique of the society.
12. *Bikram Keshari Das* (2003) in *Spirituality and Social Reform in Odisha* examines how Mahima Dharma was able to provide spiritual freedom as well as social empowerment. Das emphasizes the anti-materialist stance of the movement, its focus upon simplicity and its preference to inner purity over formulated worship keeping.
13. *R.N. Panda* (2008) in *Vernacular Saints and Subaltern Ethics* writes about Bhima Bhoi as a subaltern saint. He indicates how the rural roots and blindness of Bhima created his distinctive theology of suffering, mercy, and divine justice, in the very depths of the psyche of the poor in Odisha.
14. *S. K. Mishra* (2015) in *Dalit Voices in Indian Literature* examines the contribution of Bhima Bhoi to the literature of Dalit. Mishra contends that the modern discourse of the Dalit scene has its prefiguration with Bhima Bhoi claiming moral authority in a marginalized space harnessing spiritual wisdom to enact social transformation.
15. *J.K. Behera* (2000) in *Tribal Renaissance in Odisha* is comprised of Mahima Dharma, that is part of the tribal-cultural rebirth. He enumerates the impact of the movement on tribal identity, as it conceived religious independence, moral awareness, and social pride in rural and tribal people.
16. *Manoranjan Mohanty* (1998) in *People's Movements in India* pays references to Mahima Dharma as a political implication in the form of a religious movement. According to Mohanty, the movement, which fought the feudal and priestly authority did not explicitly criticize global social structures, but this constituted an implicit criticism of the prevailing social orders.
17. *Sanghamitra Das* (2016) in *Bhakti and Beyond: Alternative Devotional Traditions in India* compares and contrasts Mahima Dharma with other Bhakti movements. She describes the poetic voice of Bhima Bhoi as being quite special in the mix of mysticism, anti-caste politics as well as rural oral tradition.
18. *Madhusudan Mishra* (2005) in *History of Odisha's Religious Traditions* is an account of the promotion of the prestige of Mahima Dharma and its fall. He points out at the struggles of the colonial subjugation and the way the writings of Bhima Bhoi revived the religion in the minds of those who were neglected.
19. *Dipti Pattnaik* (2011) in *The Voice of the Marginalized* explains the way Mahima Dharma provided an alternative spiritual platform to the communities which did not have access to the worship in temples. She sees the verses of Bhima Bhoi as divine-human sympathetic thoughts that defied structural inequality.
20. *Prabhat Kumar Nayak* (2007) in *Bhima Bhoi: Mystic and Messenger* gives a theological as well as biographical analysis of Bhima Bhoi. Nayak mentions his mystical encounters, his voluntary re-blinding as a moral eyesight and lifelong dedication to the sufferings of others.

4. Research Methodology

This work takes the philosophical, social, and cultural aspects of Mahima Dharma as expressed in the

book, Mahima Dharma as a qualitative research study. The given methodology is set up to investigate the textual, historical, and ethnographic nature of the Mahima tradition, with particular consideration to the words of Mahima Swami and poetic speech of Bhima Bhoi.

4.1. Research Design

The study has the design of an interpretive and historical, which focuses on descriptive and analytical approaches. This book attempts to recreate the doctrinal premise and the social influence of Mahima Dharma in terms of textual consideration and field observation.

4.2. Sources of Data

4.2.1. Primary Sources

- Mahima ro Dhara (Odia) is regarded as a primary philosophical and theology source of research.
- Oral-narrative testimony of Mahima Sadhus and Mahima devotees in Khaliapali (Sonepur) and Kapilas (Dhenkanal) through field-interviews.
- Songs and works of Bhima Bhoi, in particular Stuti Chintamani.

4.2.2. Secondary Sources

- Literature books and articles about the Mahima Dharma by historians like Dr. Chittaranjan Das, Prof. Satrugana Nath and Dr. Bhagaban Panda.
- Historical writings, periodical articles and archival records pertaining to the colonial era mentioning about Mahima Dharma.

4.3. Fieldwork and Ethnographic Observation

Field visits were conducted to:

- The capital of Mahima Dharma in western Odisha is Khaliapali.
- Kapilas Hills which were assigned to spiritual austerities of Mahima Swami.
- The dialogue with monks, devotees, and local historians was pursued as a means of acquiring information about the practice and memory customs nowadays.

4.4. Data Collection Tools

- Practitioner interviews (semi-structured possessing religious leaders).
- Acting as a spectator of religious ceremonies and festivals (e.g. Joranda Mela).
- Through content analysis of religious literary materials as well as published literature.

4.5. Analytical Framework

- The interpretation is a hermeneutical approach of insights of spiritual and poet text interpretation. Here are also perspectives of:
 - Religion (e.g. mystical modes of thought, non-dualism),
 - Dalit studies and subaltern theory particularly in the society was a major relief given towards the examination of Bhima Bhoi in the social philosophy department.
 - Postcolonial critique to explore the way in which Mahima Dharma responded to colonial modernity.

4.6. Limitations

The study faces the constraint imposed due to the lack of writings, both in English and Odia and the use of oral sources that are vulnerable to change and subjectivity.

5. Research Gap

In spite of the fact that the academic interest to indigenous religious traditions of India is increasing, Mahima Dharma as a religious tradition is vastly understudied both on the national and in the international dialogue of religion, philosophy and subaltern studies. The initial overview of current literature shows that the following key gaps still exist:

1. Lack of Philosopher Critique of Sunya Vada:

Although the modern metaphysical thinking of Bhima Bhoi conceptualizing the Sunya Brahma (formless Absolute) can be found at the core of Mahima Dharma, there is no sequential analysis of this idea in terms of a philosophical comparison with other Indian metaphysics (Advaita Vedanta, Vishishtadvaita, or Buddhism Shunyavada). It is not that the works that are already written do not touch this theme, but they do not develop it in detail and prove its novelty and uniqueness.

2. There is also little attention to Bhima Bhoi as a theologian:

Bhima Bhoi is mostly examined as a mystic poet or social reformer. But about his participation as a vernacular theologian and also a philosophical explicator of Mahima Dharma is not fully dealt with. His poetic works such as Stuti Chintamani contain highly metaphysical insight incorporating a sense of bhakti (devotion), morals and cosmology- however these aspects have been under analysed by academia.

3. Oral Tradition and Ritual Practices Underrepresentation:

Mahima Dharma transmission by oral traditions, bhajans, cautisas and musical instruments such as khandani and Gini, usage specially in Rural Odisha, have not got due documentation. The lack of ethnographic conversion of how the modern adherents practice this form of rituals and how they practically adopt the teachings of Bhima Bhoi is also evident.

4. Disregard of Regional Context and Vernacular Agency:

Mahima Dharma origin and development can be well explained in terms of the socio-cultural and political context in the 18 th -19 th centuries in Odisha. However, a common academic habit is to reduce it to other furniture of the greater reformist Hindu tradition without seeing its regional particularity or seeing it from the perspective of its quasi-critique of caste-based orthodoxy alongside colonial domination. This covers its radical indigenous agency.

5. Lack of Comparative Models of Discipleship:

It has not been compared about the role of Govinda Baba and Bhima Bhoi and Biswanath Baba in spreading Mahima Dharma. The two persons, Bhima Bhoi and Biswanath Baba, are credited with influencing the course of the faith, although their understanding of theology, using the medium of mystical poetry versus scriptural (Vishuddhadvaita) orientation, begs to be compared at greater length on theological and sociological ground.

6. Exclusion within the study of Global Religions:

Although the existence of Mahima Dharma is referred to by scholars as the true contribution of Odisha to the world religion, as was by Prof. Satrugana Nath and Prof. Chittaranjan Das, Mahima Dharma virtually does not exist in global research of new religious movements or postcolonial religion. This is part of a general disregard, in conventional religious studies, of non- advantageous, non- Brahman, indigenous, anti-idolatrous religious tendencies.

Certainly. The Scope of the Study has been well drafted below basing on your emphasis that you placed on Bhima Bhoi, and the core philosophy of Mahima Dharma, particularly vis a vis the indigenous religious tradition of Odisha:

6. Scope of the Study

The main point of this work is an attempt to focus the theological, philosophical and literary works of Bhima Bhoi in the context of the indigenous religious movement known as Mahima Dharma which developed in Odisha at the end of the 18 th and beginning of 19 th century. The research is a delimited study of the following facets:

1. Philosophy of Mahima Dharma:

Researchers concentrate on the main philosophical beliefs of Mahima Dharma, above all, its own understanding of Sunya Brahma (Formless Absolute) as formulated by Bhima Bhoi. It attempts to examine the manner in which this concept reshapes indigenous conceptions of divinity, reality, and spiritual emancipation, as opposed to popular Hindu theological standpoints.

2. Bhima Bhoi the Disseminator of Mahima Dharma:

The paper analyses the life, vision and spiritual mission of Bhima Bhoi, more particularly, his participation as the main disciple and spiritual voice of Mahima Swami. Particular references are made to internal awakening (divya-chakṣu) of Bhima Bhoi, his poetical creations, and social-spiritual consciousness of Bhima Bhoi in his literary work.

3. Literature and Devotion:

In the research, work is concentrated on significant poetry works by Bhima Bhoi, which are Stuti Chintamani and Cautisas, to explain the aspect of devotional and metaphysical aesthetics in poetry. It also examines the traditions of the oral and music which influenced greatly the popularisation of the texts among the mass in Odisha.

4. Spiritual and Social Reform:

The paper evaluates the role that the spiritual teachings of Bhima Bhoi played to solve some of the socio-religious problems concerning caste discrimination, ritualism, and dominance of priest castes, thus making the Mahima Dharma a way of spiritual liberation as well as social criticism.

5. Geographical and Cultural Orientation:

Geographically the research in Odisha has focused on specific geographical areas such as Sonapur, Dhenkanal or the Kapilas hills which are significant of the spiritual dimensions of the Mahima tradition. It aims to realize the way indigenous cultural matrix of Odisha helped and influenced the development of Mahima Dharma.

6. Compared Focus (Restricted):

The study focuses mainly on Bhima Bhoi, yet, every now and then, there are pocket descriptions of Govinda Baba and Biswanath Baba, as an attempt to put the wider picture of the spread of Mahima Dharma into context. But their interpretations of doctrines are not the main factor.

7. Historical Timeframe:

Historically, the study can be traced to somewhere between the late 18 th century and the early 20 th century, as a commentary can also be offered on the applicability of the thought of Bhima Bhoi in modern Odisha.

7. Social Impact

As we know, Philosophy deals with the relation between man, God and the world. God is the creator of the of the universe. What is the nature of God in Mahima Dharma? for Bhima Bhoi, the God is *Sunnya*. He is one but found everywhere. He is omnipresent. He is not only present in human beings but also in plants and animals. q

In *Stuti Chinatamani* Bhima Bhoi writes: -

Sakala ghatare Puri

Samanare rahi achha anusari

He is Mahima Alekha - who cannot be described in mere words. He is not born from womb (*Ajoni Sambuta*). He is *Nirakara, Nirguna and Sunnya Purusha*. He is found everywhere. Mahima Dharma preaches that *Sunnya* is God. Since every creature is a living God, there is no need to worship or pray to idols made of stone or wood. The *Sunnya Prusha* who is all-pervading has come down to earth to mitigate the sufferings of mankind. He is *Parama purusha* (One who is found everywhere). Thus Prof. Tandra Pattanaik in her book “*God as Sunnya*” gives a very clear exposition of God who is *Sunnya*. We find Mahima Dharma gives a clear view of Absolute Monism like the view of Spinoza of western Philosophy.³

What about the nature of man? Man is called as *jiva* (individual self) This *jiva (pinda)* is same as *brahmanda* (world or cosmos). God, world and Man are of same nature but with degree. God is the Creator whereas the world and man are creations. Mahima Swamy advocates that for God realization, one need not be a *sannyasi*. A *sannyasi* or a monk has to follow certain principles. A house-hold can follow Mahima Dharma but with certain norms. Bhima Bhoi opted to be a *gruhi* than to a monk. He prayed to Mahima Swami to allow him to follow/ propagate the dharma while maintain his family life.

Bhima writes;

“*Gruha karma thibi,*

Anastha nohibi ethi ajna mote heu”

What is goal of life? The goal of life is to realize the God who is *Sunnya*, what is *Sunnya*? *Sunnya* Brahma stands for Purna Brahma i.e., “*Akhandita Brahma*”. Now the question is, how to realize the Brahma? For this, Mahima Dharma lays down certain code of conduct. The codes of a monk (*Sunnyasi*) are different from the codes and conduct of a household. The monk (wondering mendicant) has to move from door to door to beg alms for his livelihood. Except rainy season (*caturmashya*) they move from place to place for alms only for the sustenance of life. They do not take shelter (rest) in any one’s house during night time.

What about the *gruhi* (household)? The household will have done their job (*jibika*) to maintain their life (*jiban*). There is no barrier to realize “*Alekha*” doing any professional work. There is nothing called superior or inferior in doing any kind of work. A brahmin’s work is on par with the work of a butcher or a fisherman or a cultivator who serves society in different capacity. Thus, the caste-system is a dogma or social evil. Everybody has the right to pray to God belonging to any caste, creed, religion. The door of Mahima Dharma is open to one and all. Mahima Dharma is against idol-worship. Swami Vivekananda once said that it is useless to go to temple, church or mosques to search for God when the God is with in you. One has to realize it. By serving the needy, poor man in the society, one can realize God.⁴ The views of Mahima Dharma attracted the people of rural Odisha very much. The *Bhajans* of Bhima Bhoi was appreciated and it appealed to their heart many people who were neglected and tortured by people of higher caste and higher status like the (*rajas/ zamindars/Gauntias*). They initiated themselves in Mahima Dharma. It became the religion of the mass. Mahima Dharma advocates *niskama karma*, *niskama bhakti* and *niskama jnana* for God -realization. One has to do his work and pray to God, and serve the society or mankind according to his choice and capacity will get salvation. No rituals are needed; no idol-worship is required. Prof. Ishita Banerjee Dube, one of the front-line researches of Mahima Extra-mural lecturer on Bhima Bhoi delivered in a National Seminar in G.M. University,

Sambalpur. aptly remarks that Mahima Dharma is the religion of common man, “it is one faith in Many faiths”.⁵

8. Suffering of poor people

If we at the social condition of the people of Odisha during 19th Century, we observe that people were facing sufferings due to poverty, illiteracy and economic backwardness'. The following are some of the major social and economic problems that underprivileged people and communities had to deal with at the time. Widespread poverty was a serious problem in Odisha. The majority of people struggled to satisfy their basic requirements for food, clothes, and shelter since they lived in poverty. Odisha's rural economy was down because of had recurrent crop failures, which resulted in food shortages and famine conditions. This misery was caused by subpar farming methods, natural calamities, and poor irrigation systems. In Odisha, a large number of the impoverished worked on other people's land without owning any of their own. They frequently encountered unfair labour practises and lacked significant negotiating leverage. The caste system was ingrained in society, and those from lower castes experienced prejudice, social marginalisation, and economic exploitation. They frequently have little access to opportunities and resources. The poor, in particular, did not have easy access to education. The widespread lack of literacy restricted the poor population's ability to move up the economic and social ladder. Healthcare there were few. Facilities, and illnesses were widespread. High mortality rates were a result of the poor's frequent lack of access to quality healthcare. Natural calamities the impoverished in Odisha suffered greatly as a result of famines and droughts, which were common in the state. During such times, food shortages, hunger, and malnutrition was widespread.⁶ There was economic exploitation whether working in agriculture, as factory workers in other sectors, or in other jobs, the poor frequently endured exploitative working conditions. They made little salaries and had unstable employment. There were types of social injustice, including as gender inequality and the persecution of tribal people, were widespread in addition to caste-based prejudice. Lack of Infrastructure many rural communities lacked adequate roads, transit, and sanitation, which made living more challenging for the poor. British Colonial Rule during the 19th century, the British colonised Odisha. The British government collected taxes and land revenue, which frequently burdened the poor and added to their financial difficulties. Social traditions and Superstitions Historically, social traditions and superstitions frequently fuelled social injustice and poverty. For instance, practises like dowry and child marriage put financial strain on families. It's crucial to remember that these conditions differed throughout different parts of Odisha and may have been impacted by elements including topography, regional administration, and cultural customs. In 19th-century Odisha, there were little initiatives to reduce poverty and enhance social circumstances.

9. Impact of Mahima Dharma in Rural Areas

Because of its simplicity and wider out-look Mahima Dharma was easily accessible to the people belonging to rural back-ground. The rural people were poor, illiterate. The prayers and cautisas of Bhima Bhoi attracted the poor mass. Bhima's clarion call was to attract villagers to the fold of Mahima Dharma by the prayers composed in local language. Bhima was the first tribal poet to raise his voice of protest against the ruling class. All man is equal. There should no discrepancy between the ruler and the ruled; the Zamidars/Gauntias and the so-called labourer class. There is no barrier for choosing any profession. One can offer his prayers to the *Sunnya Brahma*, who is *Nirguna* and *Nirakara*, thus, Bhima's outlook

was to provide a religion without any idol-worship because all human being, flora and fauna are the creations of the great creator who is no other than *Sunnya Brahman*. Why to search for God in a temple or idol made of wood or stone? The so-called prayers and rituals like the havans in the temple are based on blind beliefs instead, one should take care of other animals, environment, flora and fauna for his own existence as well as the survival of the cosmos.⁷

Mahima Dharma as propounded by Bhima Bhoi prescribes certain norms for the devotees to follow. The followers of Mahima Dharma should maintain their family life by adopting to the profession of their choice and at the same time, dedicate themselves to *Mahima Alekha*. It is unconditional Self-surrender (*sarana*) and they should follow some norms like “*Jyoti Darshan*” (*darshana*).

It was observed that majority of the poor people of the rural blackguard were initiated to the fold of Mahima Dharma, accepted it as a were of life that provided them peace of mind, a feeling of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (entire world is my family) and led a happy life.

10. Conclusion

Mahima Dharma being the indigenous religious movement of Odisha has led to a great change in the socio-religious background of the rural people particularly in the 19 th and early 20th century. Beginning with Mahima Swami and being made popular with Bhima Bhoi, the movement questioned the established systems of caste discrimination, ritual puritanism and clergyman authority. Its fundamental organizing principle, which was Sunya Brahma (formless and all-pervading divine), was used to reinvent spiritual devotion without being idolatry and ritualism, and spiritual experience would be made open to the marginalized people, especially Dalits and Adivasis.

Mahima Dharma in rural Odisha also served as a social equality booster where it turned away the acts of exclusivity embraced by the castes and propagated the concept of all-embracing brotherhood and the living of moral lives. Local folk Odia dialects: The poetic words by Bhima Bhoi were readily appealing to the rural population because of the strength of its powerful words and composition written by him. His poems were more than spiritual teachings; they gave people a shared sense of awareness where they understood that society should live in compassion, non-violence and truth. Creation of ashrams and community prayer system also made spiritual practice more democratic and also gave followers the sense of belonging.

Further, Mahima Dharma cultivated and cherished the native cultural manifestation by means of oral traditions, devotional music, and morality lessons of which fragments remained in isolated sections of Odisha. It has served as a long dynasty because it provided a spiritual way with an alliance of community-based religion, local words, and morals. To summarise, the Mahima Dharma was not only a religious revival, it was a socio-cultural uprising that made the rural poor socially empowered and changed the spiritualism of Odisha with the message of inner realisation and simplicity and inclusivity.

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