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## Bhima Bhoi, the Subaltern Saint Poet of Odisha

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### Abstract

This paper aims to understand the life of Bhima Bhoi as a subaltern saint poet and studies his poems, his reformative teachings and their impact on the people. It also discusses some of the principal philosophical ideas in his poems. The paper argues that Bhima Bhoi as a poet of humble origin has social reform, simplicity and devotional undertones in his poetry and for these reasons, his poems are popular among the masses. It also analyses some features of his poems that contribute to this popularity.

**Keywords:** Bhima Bhoi, Subaltern saint, *Mahima Dharma*, *Satyayuga*, *Alekha*

### Introduction

There are two traditions of *bhakti*: *saguna bhakti* and *nirguna bhakti*. Though there are certain commonalities between these two, there are differences too. *Saguna bhakti* is "god centric and *nirgun bhakti* is human centric" (Sahoo 14). *Saguna bhakti* evokes the attributes of gods, whereas *nirguna bhakti* stresses on human and spiritual values. *Nirguna bhakti* saints could achieve their sainthood due to their refinement, humanistic, and spiritual values. They gave primal importance to human beings. They also highlighted social problems such as the exploitative feudal system, caste hierarchy and gender inequality. They raised voice against inequality and oppression and worked for establishing a better social order.

The *Natha* saints in North India in the 15<sup>th</sup> century were the followers of *nirguna bhakti*. It had its impact till the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We also have other saints such as Goswami Tulsi Das (1550-1600) who preached these ideals among the masses. In the same way, Saint Kabir (1505) of the 16<sup>th</sup> century preached *ekeswaravad* or oneness of God. Bhima Bhoi's *Mahima Dharma* is also a similar religious movement.

### Bhima Bhoi and Mahima Dharma

Before Bhima Bhoi, there were *bhakti* poets in Odisha. They were Balarama Das, Jagannatha Das, Achyutananda Das, Yashobanta Das and Sishu Ananta Das. Each of them lived in different times during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and wrote *bhakti* poems and preached before the advent of Sri Chaitanya in Odisha. Bhima Bhoi was influenced by Mahima Goswami. It will be helpful here if we have a glimpse of the life of Mahima Goswami.

### The legendary life of Mahima goswami

Mahima Goswami is also known as Mahima Gosain, Mahima Swami, Jogeswara Mahaprabhu, and Mahima prabhu. There is no written biography of this saint and there are no official records of his

date of birth, names of parents and place of birth. Whatever facts about him are available, they are based on legends and oral narratives. He is said to have appeared in Puri in 1826 and there he was known as "dhulia baba." He was called dhulia baba because he was seen simmering himself in *dhuli* or dust. His fundamental philosophy was monotheism or *ekeswaravada*. He preached *ekaswaravada* among people and became very popular in Puri. As Nayak mentions, his popularity was not tolerated by the *brahmins* of Puri. So, he was forced to leave Puri. He left Puri and came to Khandagiri, Bhubaneswar and did *japa* here. He lived there for four years then in 1838 left Khandagiri and went to Dhenkanal's Kapilas hills and lived there for twelve years. Then he travelled in Rairakhol region and in other places and met people and preached his ideas. He also performed some miracles. Around this time, he rescued Bhima Bhoi from a deserted well. He established the famous *Mahima gadi* in Jaronda and many *Mahima Tungis* in different parts of Odisha to preach *Mahima Dharma* or the religion of the Glory of God.

### The life of Bhima Bhoi

Bhima Bhoi, the follower of Mahima Swami, also had a legendary origin. Like the hagiography of any other saints, the details of his birth and parentage are not recorded. His followers do not believe that he was born from a mother's womb. However, according to one source, Bhima Bhoi was born in 1855 in a village called Jatasingha in Sonapur district of Odisha (Mahapatra). He was born in a grove on the ridge of a pond. A Kondh *adivasi* couple called Danara Bhoi and Maharagi Bhoi who had no children had found him in a grove and adopted him. Bhima's adoptee father, Danara Bhoi passed away after a few days. Danara's younger brother (Bhima's *kaka*) who lived in Athamallik came and took Bhima and his mother along with him. After a few days, Bhima's adoptee mother Maharagi also died. His uncle married a girl from the neighbouring house. Bhima was taken care of by the newly married mother for a few years. She gave birth to two children later. Then she started ill-treating Bhima. Bhima, not able to suffer the ill-treatment, left the village and started wandering and begging. He reached a village in Rairakhol area and was kept as a servant by a rich and kind-hearted farmer called Chaitanya Pradhan. He worked for Chaitanya Pradhan of Rairakhol as a help taking care of his cattle. He lived in a *chawl* near Pradhan's cowshed as he was an untouchable Kondha. He used to listen to the recitation of *Bhagabata* and *Purana* from the *Bhagabata Tungis* that was near the *chawl*. Bhima Bhoi "was said to have lost his eyesight in early childhood after an attack of small-pox" (Mansingh 143). He was said to have been rescued by Mahima Goswami. When he was twelve, he left the job given to him by his master and wandered and did *tapa* at Kapilas where his guru Mahima Swami had meditated and preached. He recited songs and they were inscribed by four Brahmin disciples. Bhima Bhoi confesses that he had not learned any Vedas and Puranas but whatever his guru dictated, he just recited that. Bhima Bhoi worked in Jaronda region for some time. Then he left Jaronda and set up his ashram in Khaliapali near Sonapur. He had many disciples and married and set up his family after that. According to a source he passed away in Khaliapali in 1895.

### Bhima Bhoi's poetry

Bhima Bhoi composed more than one hundred collections of poems. But only about twelve are available. There are efforts to collect more texts by the poet. Important among them are *Brahma Nirupana Gita*, *Stuti Chintamani*, *Astaka Bihari Gita*, *Chautisa Madhu*

*Chakra* and *Bhajanamala*. Two collections namely, *Atha Bhajan* and *Bangala Atha Bhajan* are written in Bangla.

The collection *Brahma Nirupana Gita* is an important text by Bhima Bhoi. Here he describes the nature and characteristics of the *Brahman*, the abode of *Guru Mahima* or *Mahima Mandir* and ways to worship the *Guru Brahma*. It is in the form of a dialogue between Gurudeba and Nirakara, he explains these concepts. First Nirakara asks questions about Brahma. In response, Gurudeba describes *Brahma* and his features, then talks about his abode. About the *Mahima Mandir* he says that

stiri purusha sethare atanti samana

Guru shishyankara sethi nahi bhinna bhinna. (Bhoi, *Stuti* 6/58)

**Trans:** Men and women are equal there

There is no discrimination between the teacher and the student.

Brahma mahanityabasi sarbe eka jati

Ahimsa Bhubana tahin nathai araasthi.(6/59)

**Trans:** All the dwellers in the *bramaloka* are the same

There is no quarrel among them as it is the abode of non-violence

In chapter seven Nirakara asks him how to worship Brahma. He explains him how to worship him through the *Mahima Nama* or thorough the name of the glory of God:

He stressed on the spiritual attributes of Shanta, Shila Daya, Kshyama:

Mahima garbharu jata hela chari dharma

Shanta shila daya kshama boli anka nama. (7/60)

**Trans:** Four *dharmas* emerge from the womb of Mahima

They are *shanta, shila, daya* and *kshama*.

He describes the Brahman in binary. He says that he is the disciple and he is the guru. He is the darkness and he is the light and so on. He has no eyes but has eyes, he has no ears but has ears. He also highlights the ill-practices of people, the way they practice idol worship and they should refrain from this meaningless practices. He says:

E ghate Jagannatha achhi,

Pratima michhare pujuchhi

Murthi Pratima suska katha

Se tate nebeki Baikuntha. (qtd. in Nayak 14)

**Trans:** Lord Jagannath resides in this body

Why do you worship the idol that is made of wood?

According to him, the Brahman resides in every one's heart, one should respect others as divine instead of worshipping idols. He asks, "Will the idols that are dry wood take you to heaven or give you salvation?". According to this text, the *Brahman* is all powerful. This body and the word are run under his command and under the mercy of the all-powerful. About the existence of the *Brahman*, he says that He is everywhere but He is nowhere. He is like the air. He is present but you cannot see Him. He also says that in worshipping the Brahma there should not be *barna bibheda* or caste discrimination. If one makes a distinction, he will go to hell. As he sings:

Brahma bhagati re au barna bheda nahi

Je bheda kariba kumhi narkare padai. (Bhoi, *Brahma* 11/103)

**Trans:** There is no *varna* difference in *Brahma Bhakti*

The one who differentiates will go to hell.

The poet also emphasises that the intellectuals who show their knowledge cannot achieve the *Brahman* because He is not attainable not through knowledge but through Bhakti or devotion. It is through quest or through craving for the *Brahman* that one gets Him. This craving is akin to the craving of a child for its mother.

### ***Stuti Chintamani***

*Stuti Chintamani* is regarded as "the most important poetical work of Bhima Bhoi" (Mahapatra 28). It consists of one hundred *bolis* or chapters and each *boli* or chapter has twenty stanzas. Each stanza is of two lines. So, the text consists of 4,000 lines. The poem is a set of prayers to Brahma. The poet prays to redeem human beings from sufferings and injustice they undergo in the *Kaliyuga*. The poet elaborately describes the sorrows and suffering of the people. He narrates how they have deviated from the path of *Satya Mahima Dharma* or the religion of Truth and indulged in inhuman activities. As a result, they have been suffering. The poet is deeply disturbed by the injustice and suffering of the world. He says that there have been sin, tyranny, exploitation, and atrocities. *Alekha Mahima* is the only answer to these maladies. He is disturbed over the fact that instead of coming to the right path human has been indulged in the worship of false god, arrogance and inhuman activities forgetting his own nature. He should save the world. The poet describes the power of *Alekha Mahima* as supreme. The poet prays again and again to *Alekha Niranjan* or the indescribable and the pure God to save the soul of the humans. He also proposes ways to achieve salvation. Here the poet gives importance to *bhakti* over *gyana*. He proclaims that bhakti can achieve what *gyana* cannot. That is why many intellectuals go on arguing about the God but cannot attain God whereas the devotees can realize Him. He says that I see Him through my mind's eye. That indicates that through devotion a devotee can find Him. In this sense, as Mahapatra argues that Bhima Bhoi's Bhakti is like that of Sri Ramakrishna. As he states, "there is something with Bhima Bhoi which is reminiscent of Ramakrishna Paramahansa"(38). For both *bhakti* is the primal way to find God. Bhima Bhoi also terms Shiva, Rama and Krishna as devotees of the supreme being or *Mahima Swami*. They could realize Him through their devotion.

In *Stuti Chintamani*, the poet prays O

Lord how long should I suffer? I have been ill-treated by people. Wherever I go, I face condemnation. People call me by caste and say that I am a Kandha. I bear the

condemnation on my shoulders as showers of rain. When I tell them to follow the Truth to come out of this, they insult me, when I talk about your glory, they thrash me and say kick him out saying, let us see how his master saves him. When I preach your glory as an unseen god, they call me Christian (a heretic).

He prays for the end of misery and suffering of the people and for a new age that is Satya yuga or the age of Truth.

### ***Astaka Bihari Gita:***

The poem *Astaka Bihari Gita* is another text by Bhima Bhoi. Here, the poet highlights the social injustice and suffering of humans. He warns people that there is rise of untold injustice, quarrel and unhappiness in the world and people should follow the right path without which there is going to be more misery and hardship. He also suggests that human beings should forget their ego and take refuge in the supreme being.

Bhima Bhoi frequently plays with the symbolism of the feet (pada). The padapadma or the lotus feet of the guru is respected in all religions. In Indian tradition, *guru* is considered as God. For Bhima Bhoi *Guru Brahma* is Mahima Swami who appeared in human form.

In his poem *Shishu Veda*, the poet says that salvation can be achieved through *Alekha*. Then he goes on to describe the attributes of *Alekha*. One can meet *Alekha* through *brahma vidya*. He is *arupa* (without image) and *anakara* (shape). He is in everyone and engages in lila.

Sunya garbhe alekha, alekha garbhe sunya

Alekha purush sunya ekai samana (qtd. in Nayak 179).

**Trans:** *Alekha* resides in *sunya* and *sunya* in *Alekha*

Because they are one and the same.

One can may note the way the poet weaves words in his poems and explains complex philosophical thoughts skillfully.

### ***Chautisa Madhu Chakra***

*Chautisa Madhu Chakra* is another significant poem by the poet. It deals with social degeneration and the need for a new age. It also deals with different concepts of Mahima Dharma and ways to attain salvation. *Chautisa*, infact, is a form of poetry in Odia. It is written in *nabakshari brutta* meaning each line of the poem consists of nine letters. The special feature of a Chautisa is that the beginning of each line begins with a letter of the alphabet in a chronological order like *ka, kha, ga...* Bhima Bhoi has gone a step forward and composed his poem in reverse order of the alphabet. As Mahapatra explains, "The concept of Mahima Dharma, the end of Kali yuga and the need for divine grace to bring about salvation of individual and the social regeneration have been explained in this" (40). It is a wonderful piece of devotional poem that can be recited with musical rhythm.

### ***Bhajanamala***

*Bhajanamala* or devotional songs by the poet are a significant body of literature. They are in the form of songs. They are also very popular among people. The musicality of his songs is a special

feature. They are wise sayings on different aspects of divine life. The devotees sing these songs with instruments called *Khanjani* and *gini*. These bhajans were written to motivate people to move towards the Brahma and follow Him. They urge people to be in *niskama bhakti* to get salvation. He gives his example as to how he has determined to be a committed devotee. He sings:

Vandana padapdmaku

Dhyayi arupanandaku

Bichara karichhi laye

Chari pure nama brahma

Ate ananta akshaya

Abalapna anakara

Ana sadhane udaye. (Bhoi, *Bhajana* 1-2)

**Trans:** I praise the lotus feet of the Lord

And meditate upon the Formless One, full of bliss.

I am determined to meditate on the Brahma who pervades the four worlds.

He is endless and un-diminishing and greater than all.

If you follow Him, you are following the satya dharma

and you will be able to overcome all obstacles.

You will not be able to be scared of anyone.

The other poems are *Adi Anta Gita*, *Padmakalpa*, and *Brahma Samyukta Gita*

### **Bhima Bhoi's language: mystic and musical**

Bhima Bhoi uses language untouched by modern influence and it is really mystic. It suits the oral tradition and also to the common folk. He departed from use of the Sanskritized Odia and adopted the vernacular Odia. The language is colloquial in nature. Since he set up his ashram and preached mostly in the Western part of Odisha one can trace the inclusion of many local words and also its influence on the structure of the lines of his poems. Sambalpur words like *ghae*= once, *chheka*=block, *tuna*= curry, *khechad*=mischief and structures like *nahi sahipariba*= cannot tolerate, *nahi sunithilu*= had not heard are typical to the colloquial language used in the Western part of Odisha. He wrote for the common people. So, his language is like "spoken sung" a feature of a typical bhakti poetry. It is musical, rhythmic and lyrical. The internal and end rhyming patterns add to the beauty to the poems. Andrew Schelling says that bhakti poetry is

"carried by the poet's voice. It has been composed orally, sometimes spontaneously. Only later it has been written" (xxi).

The same has happened in the case of Bhima Bhoi. He used to recite his poems and there were four scribes who would write them down. Another feature of bhakti poetry as Schelling describes is that "in bhakti poetry there is a minimal art of maximum involvement" (xxi). Bhima Bhoi's voice

and person can be identified in each line of his poems. They are emotive expressions. His poems are rhythmic and rhyming. They are also simple and easy to understand and remember. Hence even unlettered people can understand, remember and recite.

### **The teachings and philosophy of Bhima Bhoi**

Like his Guru's, Bhima Bhoi's main teaching was *Ekaishwara Brahmavada* or One God who is *aleka, indescribable, arupa*, has no image, *nirakara*, no shape and *niranjana*, pure. He lives in sunya or in void. He can be achieved through the ideals of Mahima swami. Some of his followers came from established families, but he also had followers from the ordinary sections of society, from the subaltern castes from women groups and so on. They lived and worked together forgetting their social identities. The followers have early bathe and bow to the sun god and pray to him. They pray to the sun god before the sun set and have their food. They don't eat during the night. They were taught simple truths of life like not to lie, not to steal, not to involve in adultery, not to discriminate and so on. He was a social reformer and was a strong subaltern voice. His teachings were liked by people at large. So had many followers in and outside Odisha at that time. Even now they practice this tradition with devotion and dedication.

### **Conclusion**

Bhima Bhoi came from an *adivasi* family. He was also unlettered but had extraordinary vision and poetic imagination. He assimilated what he heard and transformed it into poetry from his spiritual realization. His spiritual concepts are unique. His teachings and poems are also unique. He was a social reformer who raised voice against caste system, included women in his cult and fought against idol worship and orthodoxy. His teachings had a greater impact on the people of Odisha, Chhatisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and parts of West Bengal. It was also a religious tradition that was open to all sections of society including the lower castes and women. It also said that even a sinner can get salvation through bhakti. Though there are limitations and contradictions within this tradition it has been a major popular religious tradition of India. Needless to say, his poems played an important role in the spread of his thoughts and spiritual practices.

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