

Mahima Dharma in Odisha

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

The founder of the Mahima movement is Mahima Swami or Mahima Gosain. His early life is shrouded in obscurity. It is said that he revealed himself in a wonderful way during 1826AD. in Puri. At that time he was sleeping on the bare ground and was, therefore, known as Dhulia (dusty) Baba. For 12 years he went about Bhubaneswar, Khandagiri, Dhauligiri and Cuttack. According to Abadhuta Biswanath Baba who has written the history of Mahima Dharma, Mahima Gosain was an incarnation of Param-Brahma and had spent his life in the Himalayas before making his appearance at Puri. What he did in the Himalayas is not known. During the period of his stay at Puri, he was propagating the theory of Advaitabada which means God is one; there is no more than one God. He tried to establish his theory before the association of learned men in Puri Temple known as Mukti Mandapa Sabha. During this period he lived on water and was, therefore, called 'Nirahari Baba'

which means living on water. Then he went to Kapilas hill in Dhenkanal district and meditated for 24 years during which period he put on the bark of Kumbhi tree. During the first 12 years he lived on fruits which were given to him from the forest, for the next 12 years he lived on milk which was being sent by Raja Bhagirathi Mahendra Bahadur of Dhenkanal.

During his stay on Kapilas hill, one Jagannath became his disciple and renouncing his name, he assumed the name of Govinda Das Baba. He renounced all other identifications such as parentage, place of birth, age etc. He was the first of the 64 *siddhas* of Mahima Dharma. Mahima Gosain gave them the title of Abadhuta when they attained Siddhi or perfection.

Mahima Gosain preaching his new religion of Mahima Dharma or Satya Mahima Dharma in the districts of Cuttack, Puri, Ganjam and in feudatory States of Dhenkanal, Athagarh, Hindol, Boudh, Sonapur as well as in the areas of Sambalpur and Angul attracted a large number of disciples particularly amongst the tribals and the classes which were considered lower in Brahmanical hierarchy. He established a number of centres of Mahima Dharma known as Ashram or Alekha Tungi. In 1874 he realized that his time to go back to the absolute void was near. He



started for his headquarters at Joranda in Dhenkanal district known as Mahima Gadi or seat of Mahima Gosain. He gave up his mortal frames on his own accord in 1876 on the 14th day of the bright fortnight of Phalguna (February-March).

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

The synthesis existing in Mahima cult comprehends many opposites such as Brahmanism and anti-Brahmanism, eastern and western traditions, Hinduism and Islam. In spite of all traditions, the basic Indian tradition is not

completely lost. It is a unique synthesis since the uniqueness does not lie in merely placing together but in bringing up a complete harmony of the divergent philosophical and religious trends and exhibit the emergence of a new light which is a class of its own type. The ascetics or followers of Mahima Dharma have to obey certain rules of conduct (Guruagnya), which Mahima Gosain gave to his followers. Severe discipline of body, mind and soul are essential principles of ascetic life in Mahima Dharma. They offer Prayers under the open sky. The prayer is mainly offered twice, the morning and the evening Brahma *muhurtas*. Morning Prayer, is started before dawn-break. At this time the follower lifts his hands above his head and prostrates certain manner uttering the glory of Alekh. The Praying postures are repeated for seven times. The same postures are adopted for five times during evening prayer called "Darshana". The food habits of the followers is temperate. They don't take even a drop of water from Sunset to the Sunrise. This is scientifically supported by the scriptural injunctions. The rituals

are reduced to a minimum, as there is no idol worship, blood sacrifices or belief in spirits and deities.

The followers of Mahima or Alekha are seen to have been divided into three sects viz, the Kumbhipatias, the Kanapatias and Ashritas. The Kumbhipatias use barks of a tree called Kumbhi [careya arborea] whereas the Kanapatias use pieces of rag for their dressing. They have their matted hair, carrying sticks and disc-like palmleaf parasols. The Ashritas do not renounce the world and use red clothes which are called *kasa* or Gairikabasana like the Brahmachari or Jogi.

Bhima Bhoi, the saint and mystic poet of Odisha was the second disciple of Mahima Gosain, the first being Govinda Das alias Jagannath Das of Balasingha of Boudh. The very essence of Mahima Dharma is echoed in the writings of Bhima Bhoi. It is learnt from his writings that Mahima Gosain himself blessed him and asked the poet to give expression to the basic teaching of Mahima Dharma. His popular works were Brahma Nirupana Gita, Nirveda Sadhana, Poorna Samhita, Shunya Rahas, Adi Samhita, Nirgun Mahatmya, Bhabisya Gupta Malika and Stuti Chintamani. His immortal work Stutichintamani contains hundred of wonderful lines breathing in strong empathy for the suffering humanity. The two famous lines of a song written by the saint-poet that find a place in the main hall of the United Nations in New York are as follows-

“Praninka Arata Dukha Apramita
Dekhu Dekhu Ke Ba Sahu

Mo Jibana Pachhe Narke Padithau
Jagata Uddhara Heu”

(Boundless is the anguish and misery of the living
who can see it and tolerate

Let my soul be condemned to Hell
But let the Universe be redeemed)

The Bhajana and Janana composed by Bhima Bhoi are very popular among the village folk. As a front ranking revolutionary and reformer, he championed the cause of the downtrodden, helpless ones and challenged the prevailing ethos of the society. He had the vision of a casteless and classless society where would be no exploitation.

Thus, the Mahima cult preaches universal brotherhood, non-violence, good neighbourliness, peaceful co-existence, freedom from greed, kindness to all including birds, animals and insects. This cult of casteless puritanism attracted disciples from the tribal and the Schedule castes not only within Odisha but also from the regions adjoining Odisha, as far as Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. The Mahima Gadi or the religious seat of the Mahima Cult is located at Joranda in the district of Dhenkanal. Spread over 100 acres, it consists of four temples-Gadi Mandira, Dhuni Mandira, Sunya Mandira and Niti Upasana Mandira. Of all the fairs and Festivals of Mahima cult, the most distinguished one “Magha Mela”, popularly known as Mahima Mela and Joranda Mela, is held in the month of Magha (Jan-Feb) for seven days. In conclusion it may be mentioned that Mahima Dharama is not just a religion but a reformation movement, a way of life and a code of conduct.

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