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Bhima Bhoi's Spiritual Humanism: A Case Study of a Philosophy of Liberation

Mr. Pramod Kumar Naik¹, Dr. Mamata Rani Pati²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar in Philosophy, Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences, KISS Deemed to be University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, 751024

²Assistant Professor in Philosophy, Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences, KISS Deemed to be University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, 751024

Abstract: *The 19th century saint and poet of Odisha, Bhima Bhoi created a distinctive philosophy of spiritual humanism, encompassing elements of bhakti, social egalitarianism, and ethics. His philosophy emerged from the Mahima tradition and goes beyond ritualistic practices, castes, and hierarchical social structures to underscore the dignity of all human beings. At the heart of his philosophy lies the notion of Sunya Brahma (void absolute). Through the works of Bhima Bhoi, we find the voice of the downtrodden, and see criticism of oppressive systems and advocacy for universal empathy, which tells us that spirituality and social ethics cannot be separated. The concept of liberation in his vision means both enlightenment and liberation, and is characterized by equality, respect for humanity, and an end to human suffering. This paper will analyze the spiritual humanism of Bhima Bhoi and its relevance in an eternal sense.*

Keywords: *Bhima Bhoi, Spiritual, Humanism, Philosophy, Morality, Liberation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The 19th century saint-poet of Orissa, Bhima Bhoi, holds a distinct place in Indian spiritual and literary tradition. Coming from a marginalized section of society, he became a crusader for social justice, equality, and eradication of caste discrimination and orthodoxy.

The philosophy of Bhima Bhoi, which can be labeled as spiritual humanism, is marked by deep devotion along with a deep sense of equality, compassion, and ethical conduct. The philosophy of Bhima Bhoi belongs to the Mahima Sect. The idea of Sunya Brahma (Void Absolute) is very important in his world-view as an element of both metaphysical theory and morality that will help achieve justice, dignity, and freedom. In his poetry, he provides voice to the downtrodden people, criticizes hierarchy systems, and sketches an ideal picture of society based on compassion and universal human principles. The present paper aims at exploring Bhima Bhoi's spiritual humanism as philosophy combining devotion, social reforms, and ethics. Nineteenth century Odia poet Bhima Bhoi deserves special attention among contemporary Odia poets. Born in 1850 in a nondescript village in the Redhakhol region of Sambalpur to a poor family, he faced abject poverty, the loss of his parents, and severe hardships from early childhood. Even blindness in his later years could not suppress his natural poetic talent.¹ Though he had no formal schooling, lyrics and poetic verses came spontaneously to his mind. His birthplace is a matter of scholarly debate, with some claiming Jaronda in Sonepur and others Redhakhol in Sambalpur.

His association with Mahima Gosain, the exponent of Mahima culture, was a turning point in his life. He established his ashram in Khaliapali near Sonepur, entered married life, and passed away in 1895 after preaching the tenets of Mahima culture and spiritual humanism to his followers.

Mahima Dharma greatly influenced him, turning him into an ascetic and non-conformist. The 19th century in India was marked by moral decadence, superstition, backwardness, and ignorance. Casteism polarized society, and ritualism and idol worship stunted human growth. Like Mahima Gosain, Bhima Bhoi protested against these societal evils. His heart bled as he witnessed inequality and Brahmin dominance. He sought to reform society through his preaching of human equality, asserting that the superiority of Brahmins and inferiority of untouchables is a myth. He also believed in monotheism, denouncing polytheism. His concept of God reflects his deep devotion to the Creator. In his poems, Bhima Bhoi glorifies God and His omnipotent power, identifying God with the Hindu concepts of Parama Brahma and Iswara Purusha. He further characterizes God as Sunya Parama Brahma or Alekha (indescribable), Nirakara (formless), Anadi (eternal), Nirguna (without attributes), Niranjan (pure), and Mahima (glorious). His thoughts and poetry are suffused with profound devotion and emotional longing for God.

II. SPIRITUAL HUMANISM

Bhima Bhoi's doctrine of spiritual humanism is rooted in his poetic work "Stuti Chintamani" which is a collection of 2000 stanzas or 4000 lines. It speaks of the decadence of human society and degeneration of man. Stuti Chintamani laments over the immorality of man and the social values. He urges the human beings to glorify God and seeks His help to bring the wayward and corrupted humans to the right path. According to him human beings can solve most of their problems by pursuing a spiritual and moral life. They should inculcate in themselves the qualities of humanism such as sympathy, kindness, generosity, feeling of equality and forgiveness. They should reform the society and eradicate all evils like idolatry, superstitions and obscure customs and traditions. Human beings are created by God, so they should be liberated from their worldly bondage so as to enable themselves to concentrate on spiritualism and devotion to God.

III. BHIMA BHOI'S CONTRIBUTION

Bhima Bhoi is looked upon as a Saint Poet by the Scholars of Odia Literature. His preaching and propagation of the ideas of Mahima Dharma or Mahima Culture has carved out a special place for him in the hearts of the literate. Though he did not leave any of his literary work in print, great efforts were made by erudite scholars like Arata Ballav Mohanty and Karunakar Sahoo to retrieve his works and to make an anthology of poetry. Prof. Arta Ballav Mahanty published Bhima Bhoi's "Stuti Chintamani" in 1931 and "Chautisa Madhuchaki" in 1948. They also published Brahmanirupana Gita and Bhajanamala to popularise the Saint Poet. Bhima Bhoi's devotional songs (Bhajans) and lyrics were taken down by his disciples. He used to compose four prayer songs or bhajans in one raga at a time. He collected bhajans in different ragas and channels numbering about three hundred ten.

One of his oft-quoted verses (verse No. 27 of Stuti Chintamani) reads:

"Praninka arata dukkha apramita dekhu dekhu keva sahu
Mo jibana pachhe narke padithau jagata udhara hau."

In English- "Let my soul be condemned to hell,
But let the universe be redeemed."³

Bhima Bhoi's philosophical ideas can be called the philosophy of liberation as he appeals to the world or mankind to free themselves from the abyss of sin, from the bondage of worldly illusions, and from the clutches of selfishness, and materialistic pleasure; and to glorify God.

IV. METHODS OF PROPAGATION AND TARGET GROUPS

The Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci noted that while religion and the church often served as instruments of dominance and hegemony, they could also become powerful agents of social change if dogmatic doctrines were gradually replaced by revolutionary ideas. He argued that the church, as a rival hegemon, could either be suppressed by force or more effectively, transformed from within by introducing new ethical, moral and rational frameworks (Gramsci and Furgacs, 1976:212). Although Bhima Bhoi was unaware of such theoretical strategies, he effectively used religion as a means to challenge social hegemony and advocate for the natural rights of humanity against exploitation. He spread the teachings of Mahima Dharma across western Odisha and encountered the struggles of large numbers of oppressed people, who's suffering deeply moved him. Under his leadership, this new religious movement initiated a kind of liberation struggle against the long-established Jagannath cult. Bhima provided the labouring masses with a modern outlook and a sense of self-empowerment, which earned him both followers and adversaries. By the late 19th century, Odia nationalism, rooted in Jagannath traditions, was growing. Many Odia elites promoted Jagannath Dharma as a civilizing and humanitarian force but rarely practiced its true values. These people perceived Bhima Bhoi as a menace who might be using his influence among the tribals to motivate them. The people were convinced that Bhima Bhoi possessed some supernatural powers due to the miracle that he did despite his humble beginnings. However, looking at the situation in today's world, it is fair to say that the feats achieved by Bhima Bhoi were a result of hard work, perseverance, and self-sacrifice on his part. He worked mostly in the forest regions and rural areas and was not close to urban centers and modern means of communication. Nonetheless, Bhima Bhoi managed to work successfully as a missionary. Using pieces of literature like Stuti Chintamani, Srutinisidha Gita, Brahmanirupana Gita, Nirveda Sadhana, and other devotional songs and Malikas, he spoke about his own hardships and reached out to the masses in their language. In the villages of Odisha, people would gather in the evening hours in places known as Tungis and recite his poetry along with traditional music. While most devotional songs serve to soothe those who suffer, Bhima's poetry instilled confidence into them and encouraged them to fight for change.

V. MAHIMA PRAYER

Prayer is one of the most significant methods through which people establish communication with the sacred/spiritual world in order to ensure wellness in their lives. It mostly entails developing an association with a divine presence or point of reverence, which includes God, divinities, spirits, ancestors, or any other spiritual being. In many cases, prayers are offered by people in order to ask for blessings on their own behalf or that of their families or communities in terms of health, prosperity, happiness, protection, peace, and guidance for making crucial decisions. Prayer can be used as an expression of faith, forgiveness, or gratitude, which in turn ensures good graces from the divine. People get to feel protected and spiritually fulfilled through prayer.

Prayer is among the most important ways through which people seek communication with the spiritual realm so as to attain well-being in life. This practice involves establishing a connection with a divine entity or point of reverence, such as God, deities, spirits, ancestors, or any other form of spirit. Many times, people pray so as to seek blessings from the spiritual beings in their own lives or those of their family members or communities in regard to health, wealth, happiness, protection, peace, and guidance for making major decisions. Through prayer, people show their faith, repentance, or thanksgiving, ensuring that the blessings of the spirit will continue coming.

VI. JANANA IN BHIMA BHOI

According to Mahima Dharma, Janana means knowledge, awareness, or the realization of the true nature of God and the universe. According to the principle of Janana, Sunya Brahma is the formless and eternal God who pervades the entire universe, and this is understood not by performing rituals or worshipping idols but by gaining knowledge through personal experience and introspection. The Janana principle enables the members to acquire self-knowledge, awareness, and wisdom, which will help them differentiate between worldly things and eternal truth. This is important in attaining moksha and living a life of compassion, equality, and responsibility.

VII. BHIMA BHOI AND MAHIMA DHARMA

Odisha was also a land of bhakti poetries prior to Bhima Bhoi. Some of the prominent poets of that time included Balarama Das, Jagannatha Das, Achyutananda Das, Yashobanta Das, and Sishu Ananta Das, who belonged to different periods in the 16th century. These poets have composed bhakti poems and preached the message of bhakti long before Sri Chaitanya emerged in Odisha. The life and works of Bhima Bhoi greatly influenced by Mahima Goswami, the founder and proponent of the cult of Mahima Dharma. The philosophy of Mahima Goswami stressed on the worship of formless, eternal, and omnipresent Sunya Brahma god without the worship of idols, castes, or rituals. It is important to know about the life and philosophy of Mahima Goswami to understand Bhima Bhoi better.

Mahima Goswami's connection influenced him to become a poet-saint not only because he had the ability to reveal his devotion and spirituality, but also due to the fact that he was a man who supported social equality and morality.

Mahima Dharma can be defined as a monotheistic religious organization which originated in the state of Odisha, India, in the 19th century. It was started by Mahima Gosain, who preached about worshipping a formless, eternal and omnipresent God who is called Sunya Brahma (absolute void). Contrary to common Hindu traditions, the religion of Mahima Dharma does not believe in idol worship, elaborate rituals, and caste system, instead stressing on simplicity, purity, and devotion to God. The sect came into the limelight through its saints, one of whom was Bhima Bhoi, who united religious zeal with social reforms by speaking out against social discrimination and oppression. Devotional songs, prayer and meditation are some of the core aspects of the doctrine and focus on personal purity and communion with God rather than any outward forms of worship. Thus, Mahima Dharma is both a religion and a philosophy advocating morality, equality and liberation. The philosophy is relevant even today in inspiring the followers of Mahima in Odisha and elsewhere regarding dignity and morality of humankind.

VIII. FREEDOM IN BHIMA BHOI' THOUGHT

Mahima Thought is a term that can be applied to the philosophical beliefs and the spiritual tenets of the Mahima Dharma which is an Odisha-based monotheistic religion. The central focus of this thought revolves around the worship of Sunya Brahma which is the formless and eternal God that pervades the entire universe. Mahima Thought is known to value simplicity, piety, and devotion but does not believe in the concept of idols, rituals, or caste systems. Equality, kindness, non-violence, and social justice are some of the core principles of this thought system. Saints such as Mahima Gosain and Bhima Bhoi are responsible for giving rise to this philosophical tradition which combines spirituality with the ideas of social reform. Through prayer, meditation, and moral behavior, one can achieve a direct connection with the divine through Mahima Thought.

“Rajara Paraja Nohu Sina Amhe
Nohu Sahura Khataka,
Jahin Guru Nebe Tahin Jaun Ambhe
Ke Aba Karun Ataka.”

IX. REJECTION OF CASTE

The 19th century saint-poet of Odisha, Bhima Bhoi, was a staunch opponent of the caste system and social hierarchy. As a member of the disadvantaged society, he experienced the problems and hardships encountered by the lower-caste community members. In his poems, he stresses that the devotion towards God should be judged not based on one's origin, social position, and ritual purity but on the devotion of the heart and love for all human beings. According to Bhima Bhoi, God does not differentiate anyone based on their caste, and all humans are created equal. Through his teachings, Bhima Bhoi taught people to demolish the barriers set by the caste system and promote equality, compassion, and universal brotherhood. He teaches us to live together in kindness, unity, and respect for all other human beings. This way, the whole world becomes one large family, which is “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.”

X. CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL HIERARCHY

The poetry of Bhima Bhoi has harshly criticized the inflexible social stratification established by the system of caste. He was critical of the separation of people according to rigid caste divisions as he considered it to be artificial segregation, which did not allow people to experience spirituality and justice in life. For Bhima Bhoi, caste was something man-made that had been used only to discriminate against people and oppress them, which stopped society from becoming compassionate and equal as per the values of humanity.

XI. EQUALITY OF ALL HUMANS

Equality of humankind was something that Bhima Bhoi was deeply devoted to. Caste or societal differences could not make an impact on this belief in equality. His concept of devotion to God or Mahima was something that had nothing to do with caste, creed, or society. He believed that it was not necessary to belong to any religion to attain devotion or spiritual worth. One's devotion would depend on one's sincerity towards it and not on his or her origin or financial status. This belief can be expressed through the line “Sab manisha eka rupa.” By using this statement, Bhima Bhoi pointed out that each individual is created equal by God and therefore should have dignity and honor. The teachings of Bhima Bhoi criticize the exploitative social conventions that make people discriminate against others on the grounds of their caste and make them believe that one is superior to the other in nature. Bhima Bhoi emphasized the equality of everyone with each other so that everyone could understand the significance of justice, fairness, and brotherhood among themselves. Bhima Bhoi's poetry is a source of inspiration for people to transcend the boundaries of social hierarchy.

XII. VOICE OF THE MARGINALIZED

Bhima Bhoi, being from a lower caste community, became an important advocate of the oppressed segments of the society. He himself saw the way in which lower caste members were discriminated against and exploited and hence in his poetry, he highlighted the problems faced by the downtrodden members of the society. Through his poetry, Bhima Bhoi criticized the upper castes for their monopoly on the religious rituals and their monopoly on the spiritual power in the society. Bhima Bhoi said that devotional attitude towards God does not belong exclusively to the upper caste members but everybody can have devotion to God irrespective of his caste or social hierarchy. In this manner, Bhima Bhoi gave a voice to the voiceless oppressed members of the society. He fought for the cause of dignity and equality of all human beings. Bhima Bhoi always focuses on the phronesis method of philosophy through liberation.

XIII. UNIVERSAL COMPASSION

What sets Bhima Bhoi apart not only as a great poet but also as a great personality is his universal compassion. The quote “Let my soul go to hell, but let the universe be saved” by him clearly conveys the idea of universal compassion that Bhima Bhoi had. In these few words, Bhima Bhoi describes what the greatest form of sacrifice can be – caring about others' liberation and happiness rather than one's own liberation. The compassion that he felt was not limited to humans alone; it extended to all living things. Through his poems, he constantly speaks about the pain of the downtrodden, the poor, and the oppressed, encouraging societies to acknowledge their pain and work towards alleviating it wherever it is seen.

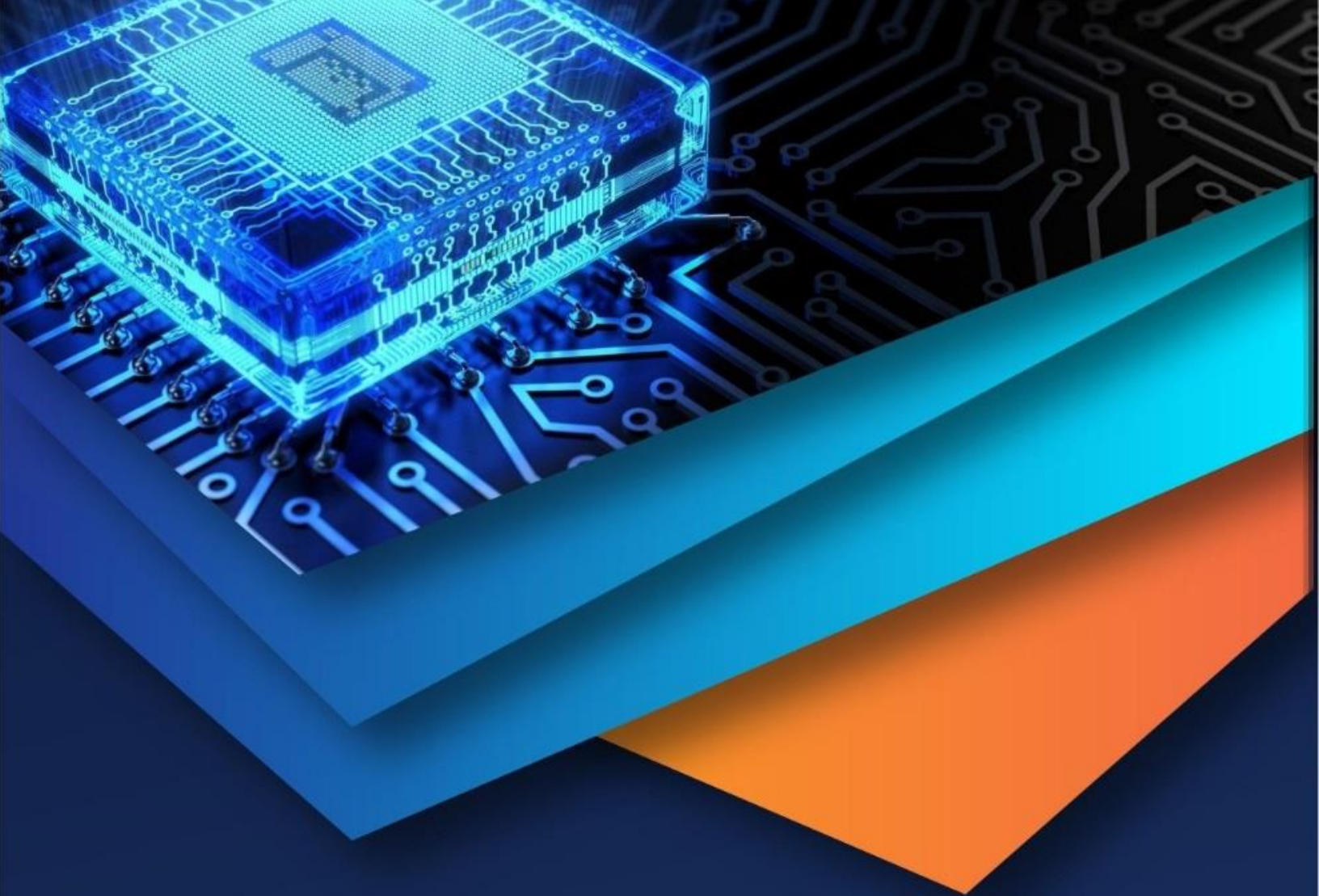
It is a universal view that defies any narrow-minded approach to religion or spirituality and stresses that real devotion comes through action, love, and service. The lessons taught by Bhima Bhoi urge people to forget about their own selfish interests, social hierarchies, and even about the threat of damnation in order to make the world better. Through his teachings, he promotes the idea of helping everybody in need in order to promote an inclusive form of spirituality that is socially and morally enlightened. His message is highly contemporary because it requires empathy and concern for the welfare of everyone without exception, thus making Bhima Bhoi an eternal symbol of universal love.

XIV. SOCIAL JUSTICE

The teachings of Bhima Bhoi can be considered a spiritual means of resistance to the injustices prevailing in society. An important part of the philosophy of Bhima Bhoi is the idea of Sunya Brahma or the absolute void, which was employed by him to lay emphasis on the need for people to fulfill their spiritual obligation of being fair and just. As per the teachings of Bhima Bhoi, spirituality does not mean mere ritualistic worship but entails active interest in ensuring justice and equality for all members of the society, particularly the oppressed classes. Bhima Bhoi's poems and preachings stressed the need to question structures of oppression, to stand up for the rights of the oppressed, and to ensure that everyone is shown due respect and compassion. In such a way, Bhima Bhoi combined spirituality with activism and proved that faith cannot be separated from ethics. The legacy of Bhima Bhoi inspires struggles for social justice and equality even today.

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