A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF BHIMA BHOI AND THE MAHIMA CULT

EDITED BY
NISHAMANI KAR

A Critical Analysis of Bhima Bhoi and the Mahima Cult

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LEXINGTON BOOKS
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Lexington Books
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

86-90 Paul Street, London EC2A 4NE

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kar, Nishamani, editor.
Title: A critical analysis of Bhima Bhoi and the Mahima cult / edited by Nishamani Kar.
Description: Lanham : Lexington Books, 2024. | Series: Explorations in indic traditions: theological, ethical, and philosophical | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024000990 (print) | LCCN 2024000991 (ebook) | ISBN 9781666955576 (cloth) | ISBN 9781666955583 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Mahima Dharma. | Bhima Bhoi, 1852-1895.
Classification: LCC BL2020.M322 C75 2024 (print) | LCC BL2020.M322 (ebook) | DDC 294.5/56—dc23/eng/20240202
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024000990
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024000991

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Contents

Introduction

Bhima Bhoi was a nineteenth-century saint-poet, philosopher, and theologian from the Kondh community of the erstwhile princely state of Sonepur, Odisha. He became the voice of protest against social injustice, religious bigotry, and caste discrimination. His faith in "Mahima Dharma" (a cult founded by Mahima Swami) led to his belief in one God, society, and religion. "Go and search the three worlds,/ You will find only one man and one caste,/The Almighty has made,/This world with a single caste" (tr. by author), asserts Bhima in his magnum opus *Stuti Chintāmaṇi*.

Bhima's poetic utterances made the Mahima Cult's dry philosophical ideas and concepts find their way to the hearts of millions in Odisha and outside the state through an outburst of lyric energy. Folk idiom and colloquial words make his language earthy, vibrating with intense emotion, ranging from insistent supplication to righteous anger and from abject surrender to indignant moral assertion. It is possible to assert that but for Bhima, Mahima Dharma would have at most remained a mere obscure philosophical cult with esoteric ideas about the void, the shapeless, and timeless universal entity.

Bhima Bhoi's legacy has been recognized in academics in recent years. Mandating the inclusion of his life, literature, and philosophy in the course curriculum for postgraduate and undergraduate students across the country, the University Grants Commission of India approved the setting up of the Bhima Bhoi Chair at the University of Delhi (D.U.), Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur, and the Central University of Orissa. The Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) has also started a research fellowship to study Santha Kabi, Bhima Bhoi. Given the above, a modest venture is undertaken to publish this book titled *A Critical Analysis of Bhima Bhoi and the Mahima Cult* to capture the attributes of his multidimensional personality and the nuances of his variegated work to impel, enlighten, and inspire the

present-day youth. A brief outline of India's religious/mystic tradition will not be out of place here.

Though the *Vedic* and *Upanishadic* Brahmanical Hinduism values transcendentalism, the Indian cult of devotion to God, popularly known as the Bhakti movement, dates back to the seventh and twelfth centuries in South India and the fifteenth century in North India, explores the meaningful bonding between the protégé and the Patron. The Alvars (Vishnu Devotees) and Nayanars (Shiva Devotees) of South India stressed poetic and dramatic picturization of the relationship between the human soul and God. In North India, the saints believed in the union of *Jeevatman* (the individual soul) with *Paramatman* (the Absolute). Shankara (788—820 AD), Ramanuja (1017–1137 AD), Basava (twelfth century), Madhva (1238–1319 AD), Ramanada (fifteenth century), Kabir (1440–1510 AD), Guru Nanak Dev (1469–1538 AD), Purandara (fifteenth century), Dadu Dayal (1544–1603 AD), Chaitanya (1468–1533 AD), Shankaradeva (1499–1569 AD), Vallabhacharya (1479–1531 AD), Kabir (1398–1518 AD), Surdas (1483–1563 AD), Mirabai (1498–1563 AD), Haridas (1478–1573 AD), Tulasidas (1532–1623 AD), Namdeva (1270–1309 AD), Jnanesvar (1275–1296 AD), Eknath (1533–1599), Tukaram (1608–1650), and Samarth Ramdas (1608–1681) were the leading advocates of Bhakti. They all sought the Divine's grace through a "simple way of devotion," discarding irrelevant rituals, blind faiths, caste rigidity, social dogmas, and religious orthodoxies. Eventually, their teachings were based on a vehement rejection of major religious traditions. They openly ridiculed all forms of external worship of Brahmanical Hinduism, the preeminence of the priestly classes, and the rigid caste system. There was a desire to adopt the more straightforward form of prayer, social conventions, and other spiritual practices. As mentioned earlier, the nuances of Mahima Cult in late nineteenth-century Odisha and in its adjoining areas logically culminate the ventures.

It would be logical now to briefly discuss the saint-poets, the prominent figures in the cultural history of Odisha. They are little known outside the region—a fact that throws into sharp relief the inadequacies of Indian historiography and the political marginalization of Odishan culture. Paradoxically, the situation is another subset of the pan-Indian socio-politico-religious praxis. Eventually, a modest attempt is undertaken in this volume to deliberately focus upon certain broad features in the lives of the saint-poets while making brief efforts to be exhaustive concerning their works and their times. Nevertheless, a comprehensive background of history, especially cultural history, is furnished to situate the saint-poets' sociocultural endeavors while highlighting their urgency and thrust. Therefore, it requires a patient perusal of the numerous narratives/texts they brought out through earlier centuries to

properly navigate and understand how manifold, sustained, and far-reaching their efforts were.

Modern Odisha has been named Udra, Kalinga, and Utkala and has achieved political and cultural relevance over a while. For different reasons, however, the territorial limits have been changed repeatedly; from an artistic viewpoint, it has remained a "salad bowl," a colorful cultural mosaic inhabiting the Buddhists, Jains, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. In this context, the point to be noted here is that the reigning deity of the land is Lord Jagannath, who embodies in Him the chief elements of different Indian sects and cults. The cult of Jagannath has proved to be a curious mixture of many features—heterogeneous and homogeneous, welded into one through a long synthetic process of evolution. To appreciate the "cultural canopy" that is Odisha (we should also remember that India also offers a similar cause), we should have a thorough revision of the geographical situation and the historical setting, which would provide the background study on the currents and crosscurrents of Odisha's religious and cultural history.

The geographical situation of Odisha has been the main factor contributing to its religious grounding. The vast sea in the east is bounded on the west by inaccessible jungle tracts and rugged mountains; it is laid in isolation from the rest of India, little affected by the political turmoil and confusion that convulsed other parts in the Middle Ages. Besides, it also served as a connecting link between northern India and the Deccan through the eastern corridor. However, the recesses in the jungles and mountains of Orissa provided the different religious sects with veritable sanctuaries and ideal settings for carrying out their religious activities in peace and tranquility, without any fear or favor of oppression and persecution. Odisha has been, for that matter, the favorite haunt of religious preachers since ancient times.

It is probable and is often accepted that the people of Odisha had adopted the Brahmanical faith before the advent of Buddhism and Jainism. The infiltration of the Aryan culture must have been a slow and long-continued process, though we find the mention of *Udra, Utkala,* and *Kalinga* in Manu and the epics. The wave of religious upheaval of the sixth century BC had also reached Orissa, as according to the prevailing Buddhist folklore, Sakyamuni promulgated the "Kalachakra System" in Odisha in his lifetime. The spread of Buddhism in the state can also be ascertained from the excavations of Lalitagiri and Ratnagiri and the recent findings in Languli Hills. Similarly, Jainism had spread in Odisha from very early times, and the "Hati Gumpha inscription" in Udayagiri and the Jain temple at Khandagiri bear testimony to such a premise. Also, as per a legend in the Jaina *Harivamsa Purana*, Mahavira Vardhamana had preached his religion before Brahmanism was firmly established in this region.

In the third century BC, Ashoka promoted Buddhism's cause after the Kalinga War; in the second century AD, Emperor Kharavela professed Jainism. Toward the end of the fifth century or early sixth century, the Gangas, who were staunch Saivites, ruled the region and flourished their religion. The Sirpur kings Jayaraja, Sudevaraja, and Pravararaja (Vaishnavas were they all) also led in the later sixth century and called themselves *Parama Bhagabata,* and incidentally, the elements of Vaishnavism sipped into Odishan socioreligious fabric. The Sailodbhavas of the seventh century AD and the Karas then championed the cause of Saivism, except Tribhubana Mahadevi, a Vaishnavi. However, from the seventh to the middle of the eleventh century, with the patronage from Somavamsi Kings in Kosala and Gangas in Kalinga, Saivism reigned supreme with the Sakta-Tantric Cult followed in its trail. In this connection, Sankara's visit to Puri (the seat of Lord Jagannath) cannot be lost sight of, as it imparted fresh strength to Saivism from the ninth century onward. With the end of the Keshari Kings, Saivism gradually declined in prominence to make room for growing Vaishnavism. Ananta Varman Choda Ganga Deva, though initially a Saivite, adopted Vaishnavism in the later part of his life. He left behind the glorious monument of his devotion to that faith in the temple of Jagannath, which was constructed during his reign and subsequently developed by his successors. In the first quarter of the twelfth century, Ramanuja visited Odisha. The famous temple of Alarnath (Alwarnath) at Brahmagiri in the Puri district bears testimony to the influence of the preaching of Ramanuja, the last of the Alwars. It is also believed that the installation of the Goddess Lakshmi in the Jagannath temple complex was due to the influence of Ramanuja, who, along with his followers, viewed Jagannath as Vishnu. Eventually, Vaishnavism rose to prominence from about the middle of the eleventh century and is continuing in its sway to influence a larger population of the region.

In the process, the twelfth century Orissa encountered two celebrated Vaishnava poets—Jayadeva, the writer of *Gita Govinda,* and Nimbarka, the author of *Krishna Karnamrita*, who popularized the Radha-Krishna Lila. Jayadeva visited Lord Jagannath and recited *Gita Govinda* before Him. From the time of Kapilendra Deva, recitation of *Gita Govinda* before the Lord during the night has remained a regular practice. However, as mentioned earlier, the Radha-Krishna idea started by the saint was perfected by Sri Chaitanya in the sixteenth century. Incidentally, it also created another school of Vaishnavism (known as "Utkalia Vaishnavism," distinctly different from the Gaudiya version), which focused on Lord Jagannath.

On a similar footing, the Sun-god worship, expected to be initiated in the first century AD, got institutionalized in Konark (the temple, otherwise known as "Black Pagoda"—an outstanding architectural and artistic excellence). Similarly, the *Ganapatyas* had their center in the Darpan estate in the district of Jajpur, and the *Saktas* promoted the *Viraja Kshetra* at Jajpur

proper. From what has been stated in the paragraphs mentioned above, it is clear that the different sects of India had glided into and surcharged the socio-religious setting of Orissa in different periods of history. Finally, all merged into the melting pot of the Jagannath cult and its all-embracing domain.

We are now reminded of the five celebrated Vaishnava poets of the sixteenth century, otherwise known as Panchasakhas (the five friends)—Balarama Das, Jagannatha Das, Achyutananda Das, Yasobanta Das, and Ananta Das, who were pioneers of Utkalia version of Vaishnavism. They are also viewed as Crypto Buddhists, as they were Vaishnavas who believed in the Buddhist cult of the void. *Sunya Samhita, Tula Vina, Gupta Gita, Virata Gita,* among others, written by these poets, are considered Buddhist within the veneer of Vaishnavism. However, in *Dharma Puja Vidhana,* Lord Jagannath is called the Buddha incarnation of Hari. Nevertheless, in the Panchasakha literature, philosophy and religion became close allies. They worked together to reach the commoner, which is unique in the history of this land. A case in point is Jagannatha Das's *Bhagabata* (a transcreation of Sanskrit *Bhagabata*), where the emphasis is on the life of the spirit, the problems of ignorance or illusion and knowledge, the equations of pleasure and pain, human destiny and grace, and the attainment of spiritual salvation. These make the Oriya *Bhagabata* an unsurpassed document in the quest for spirituality as an essential dimension of the Hindu view of life. At the same time, the narratives of Panchasakhas are conceived in a lyrical and metaphysical language, aesthetically satisfying and emotionally refreshing. For centuries, the works have served as the basic foundation of social and ethical values and have regulated Odisha's culture, social ethics, and value systems.

To be focused, we are to ascertain that Jagannatha Das's *Bhagabata* is to the Oriyas, perhaps more than what the "Bible" is to the Christian world. There is, however, scarcely an Oriya village where at least one complete set of the *Bhagabata* is not worshipped or a home where it has not been known, listened to, read, and recited. Even when society has been changing fast under the impact of modernizing forces, the *Bhagabata Tungi* (the house at the center of a village, where *Bhagabata* is recited and listened to by the masses) is still found in many villages or at individual homes, and *Bhagabata Parayana* or recitation is done in every evening. It is said that Sankardeva from Assam saw for himself the tremendous impact of the *Bhagabata Ghar* in the life of Oriyas and started the institution of *Namagharas*. Like Jagannatha Das's *Bhagabata*, the other seminal epics that have shaped the society and culture of the Oriya-speaking people and given them a distinct identity are the *Mahabharata* of Sarola Das, the *Jagamohan Ramayana* of Balarama Das, and the *Harivamsa* of Achyutananda Das. This phase, however, compels us to admit that Orissa had been in the mainstream of the spiritual quest that characterized Indian life. The works cited above, and their writers [essentially

Srasta (creator) and *Drasta* (visionary) are they all] are the finest expression of such a quest. Chitta Ranjan Das, who has done commendable work on *Santha (Bhakti) Sahitya* (1982), has identified the tradition perpetuated by saints in Orissa, which may be alluded to

> The Panchasakhas are the representatives of a time, which in India is accepted as the Saint Period—in literature, spiritual practice, and culture. Unlike the literature of the Saint period in Orissa, Indian literature in any other period has not embraced the broad aspects of life and society. (Das 207)

On a similar grounding, a host of saint-poets: Raghu Arakshita, Bhakta Salabega, Bhaktakabi Krushna Das, Mahatma Panu Das, Sridhar Swami, Sidha Kabi Parshurama Bihari, Narayanananda Abadhuta Swami, and Kantakabi Laxmikanta, to name a few, revealed their passionate devotion to the Almighty in their songs (otherwise known as *Jananas/Bhajans*), especially in praise of Lord Jagannath. The poets have also indicated their intense suffering in hostile surroundings where they found themselves helpless but for Divine assistance. An example:

> You have deprived me of everything,
> What glory's banner can you fly now?
>
> [Laxmikanta Mohapatra, *Jibana Sangita*] (Tr. Mishra 908–909)[1]

Later in the nineteenth century, we also come across important poets like Kavisurya Baladeba Rath, Gopal Krushna, and Dinakrushna, who were essentially linked to the past, to the earlier Bhakti and Vaishnavite traditions that manifested in devotional, metaphysical love lyrics. In Madhusudan Rao, Kuntala Kumari Sabat, and Baikunthanath Patnaik, we nevertheless find a contemplative and semimystical meditative preoccupation with life. Here are a couple of examples:

> Life is limitless, salvation infinite;
> . . . let my energy flow as a fountain/beneath your eternal feet.
>
> [KK Sabat, *Viswarupa O Premaswarup* (Cosmic Form and the Image of Love)][2]
> (Tr. Mohanty 901)

And,

> In the garden of my life, breath can be heard
> Your flute's delicate time, the breath of life/ your welcome arrival; . . .
>
> [Baikunthanath Patnaik, *Jatra Sangita* (The Song of the Journey)][3]
> (Tr. Padhi 902–903)

The contributions of the poets mentioned in the analysis above form a composite whole of the Oriya literature that had grown and developed between the fifteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. For the most part, the saint-poets speak for themselves. In our effort to present a comprehensive picture, we should not force a superficial similarity upon them. Instead, we must point out significant differences among the saint-poets of Orissa. This somehow paves the way for analyzing the Mahima Cult and Bhima Bhoi.

In the late nineteenth century, some Crypto Buddhists took the name *Alekha*. The pioneer of *Alekhism* was the poet Bhima Bhoi, who was born of a Kondh family in the Rairakhol estate sometime between 1850 and 1860. The tribal poet preached through his typical philosophic-religious symbolism the equality of masses as he realized the consistent presence of a formless God in every human being. While questioning idol worship, the followers of the Mahima Swami (of whom Bhima Bhoi was the foremost disciple) denounced the traditional ritual practices. The Dharma adopted a position of open attack on the orthodox tradition of Brahmanical restrictions and practices. In this context, we are reminded of the observation of Sitakant Mahapatra in *Bhima Bhoi: Makers of Indian Literature,* which goes thus:

> It is a pheomenon of great significance that Bhima Bhoi, who was a blind, low-caste Kondh, became the progenitor of a religious system that disowns the caste system and idolatry. His principal seat was in the Feudatory State of Sonepur, where many of his followers assembled to hear his doctrines. (Mahapatra 9)

Bhima Bhoi's poetry, essentially metaphysical and spiritual in its concern, marked a radical departure from the pervasive romanticism of nineteenth-century Oriya literature. Though obscure at times in the use of esoteric symbolism of the Mahima Cult, the poems of Bhima Bhoi depict human suffering with characteristic ease and poise. His masterpiece *Stuti Chintāmaṇi* (A Prayer to the Lord) is a collection of one hundred prayers, where the poet gives vent to his tragic sense of spiritual isolation. An example:

> Sad and miserable, I pray for/refuge in You, O Lord
> I've no strength left in me, no patience,/to practice and realize the *One Letter Pure*.
>
> [Bhima Bhoi, *Stuti Chintāmaṇi*, 31 (A Prayer to the Lord)][4]
> (Tr. Mishra 908–909)

Before estimating Bhima's poetry and philosophical leanings, we are expected to scrutinize how and why the renegade poet came to the limelight and drew the attention of the Odisha milieu, whose historical compulsion

forced us to accept him as a saint. Based on Debendra Kumar Dash's observation, five documents are relevant, three published during his lifetime and two after his demise (Dash 122). The first one was published in *Utkal Dipika*, Vol. 16, No. 2, dated 19.11.1881. The learned editor of the journal, Gourishankar Ray, questioned Bhima's personal life and conducted it while appreciating his poetic fervor and mellifluousness. In his estimation, the cult faced conflict and opposition, leading to adherents getting segregated into two distinct sects in 1879 after the founder's demise, in 1876. Of course, his comments were based on a report by the Chief Commissioner of Madhya Pradesh published in *Calcutta Gazette* indicating the origin and growth of a new cult with a sizeable following. With this, Bhima appeared in the public glare. The second document refers to an article published in the *Proceedings of Asiatic Society of Bengal* dated January 1882 with the title: "Origin and Growth of the Sect of the Hindu Dissenters Who Profess to Be the Followers of Alekh," based on the Report of the Commissioner of the Orissa Division. We have to keep in mind the same for a complete and thorough understanding as it presents a short account of the origin and growth of the Mahima Cult.

The third document refers to a letter dated 22.02.1983 addressed to the editor of *Utkal Dipika* written by Damodar Pattnaik, editor of *Sangita Sagar*, published in *Utkal Dipika*, Vol. . 18, No. 11, dated 17.03.1983. This letter points to the division of the adherents into two different groups and the internal squabbling in between, though it has appreciated Bhima and his followers. It has asserted that the cult could have gotten due appreciation like the Brahmo Samaj had it not been followed by the lowly and uneducated. It has also referred to Nrusingha Das and the Mahulpada *Gadi* (seat), about which the later historians are invariably silent.

The fourth document refers to an essay by Damodar Mohanty published in *Mukura*, Vol. 02, Issue No. 9 & 10, Dec 1907—Jan 1908. Mohanty was a worker in the Sonepur estate and might have come in direct contact with the seer; therefore, his account deserves authenticity. But it has a limitation—he has named it "a legend." This asserts that Bhima became a legendary personality twelve years after his demise. The essay has two distinct parts; the first deals with the history of the Mahima Cult, and the second is the story of the transformation of Bhima as a poet from an ordinary cowherd boy through supernatural intervention, which Mohanty might have collected from hearsay. Whatever it is, we may safely conclude that Bhima was at the center stage of discourse in the first decade of the twentieth century. This essay, however, asserts that Bhima, the second-generation leader of the Mahima Cult, codified the norms and philosophy of the faith through his Bhajans and Jananas, though it was earlier circulated through word of mouth from the days of the founder. Eventually, the "Bhima Kandha" of the *Utkal Dipika*

got metamorphosed into a "Dharma Vir." It can be safely said that Mahima Gosain is the prime progenitor of the faith. In that case, Bhima is its foremost interlocutor, the leader of the second phase. The former charts the way for humanity, while the latter has set the tone through his poetry for the ascent of the depressed.

The fifth document refers to LSS O'Malley's article titled "Kumbhipatias" published as a subchapter in the "The People" chapter of the *Bengal District Gazetteer: Sambalpur* (1909). Since a Government Report, this document has nothing new except a few misguided representations of Bhima and his followers. But one thing is sure: due credit is given to Bhima and his Khaliapali Ashram for providing a new lease of life to the dying faith and its shrinking base. Hence, by the second decade of the twentieth century, Bhima had been accepted as a prominent figure in the cult.

The other significant works on Bhima Bhoi are (1) Bijoy Chandra Majumdar's "Doctrines of Alekhism," published in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, London (1911); (2) Majumdar's *Sonepur in Sambalpur Tract* (1911); (3) Nagendranath Vasu's *Modern Buddhism and its Followers* (1911)—Chapter V; (4) "Preface" to Vasu's *Revival of Buddhism* and *The Archaeological Survey of Mayurbhanj* (1911), and (5) Sachidananda Ray's essay titled "Mahima Dharma," published in *Mukura* Vol. IX, Issue 4–5, 1914. Meanwhile, Bhima's *Stuti Chintāmaṇi* and *Brahma Nirupana Gita* were brought out with a "Foreword" by the Sonepur King Bira Mitrodaya Singhdeo. *Sharira Tatwa Bhajana*, a collection of his Bhajans by Hari Behera, a Mahima adherent, belonged to this period; the third edition was available in 1915. However, in the "Preface" to his *Typical Selections from Oriya Literature* (1923), Bijoy Chandra Majumdar appreciated Bhima's poetic felicity and grouped his *Stuti Chintāmaṇi* and a *Chautisa* as representative types of Oriya literature. Eventually, Bhima emerged from the secluded confines of Mahima centers and reached the broader echelons of academics.

Meanwhile, Bhima's significant works (*Stuti Chintāmaṇi*, *Brahma Nirupana Gita*, *Bhajanmala I* and *II* with hundred bhajans each, *Shruti Nisedha Gita*) with extended forewords by Artaballava Mohanty were published by Prachi Samiti. Nityananda Sahu published his booklet *Gruhadharma* with Ketuka Devi's support; another book, *Astaka Bihari Gita*, was also published by Ajaya Kumar Ghosh. Incidentally, a detailed discussion on the Mahima Cult was brought out by *Utkal Dipika* on 05.06.1926. The abovementioned efforts established the Mahima Cult in the public domain, and Bhima emerged as its primary interlocutor. Nevertheless, there is no comprehensive discussion on how and why Bhima emerged as the forerunner of the faith. Of course, efforts had been undertaken by a section of the adherents to challenge his authority. Contrastingly, some theories came to the fore that he was born blind and got eyesight through the intervention of Mahima Swami. We dare say

that sight here is a metaphor for enlightenment, and Bhima stresses that true "sight" does not require the physical body's functions. These legends reinforce the point that *moksha* can only be reached by concentrating on the inner self through intense meditation rather than focusing on the external self and the requirements of the physical body. Only those who go down this path of spiritual self-awareness can overcome *Maya* and become one with the Brahman.

In the uncertainty of contrasting, often contradictory, viewpoints of different subgroups, different centers were raised in Malabiharpur, Mahulapada, Khaliapali, and finally, the main center at Joranda, as Mahima Swami was put to rest there in Samadhi. However, in the flow of events, it so happened that Bhima and Mahima almost became synonymous. What is essential, thus, is to explore the historicity of the events leading to Bhima's preeminent stature (Dash 129). This book will eventually address such cogitation and provide a perspective for future analysis.

This book has six parts, with an intuitive Introduction and insightful Conclusion. Part I introduces the nuances of the discourse on the Mahima Cult.

Prof. G P Das views the "Mahima Cult" as revolutionary based on its worldview (*weltanschauung*) and ethical vistas; it appropriates the ideas of Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism and even goes beyond. The perspective of this cult conforms to the life of one living in a rustic rural Indian village. The essential is what is virtuous, righteous, and fair. Eventually, anything inessential is unjust, undeserving, and unfair. One has to discriminate between and choose one rather than the other between just and unjust, *yoga* and *bhoga*, both the alternatives having equal appeal for the ignorant and the dogmatic. Incidentally, practicing *satya* and being committed to *Dharma* are not two different things. It is the same thing in twofold aspects. *Dharma* is the goal, and Satya is the path to attaining the goal. Bhima Bhoi, the prime interlocutor of the cult, severely castigates idol worshippers who opt for lavish celebrations without understanding the spiritual ideas projected as transcendental ideals. In the view of Das, the sole aim of Mahima Dharma is to ensure that there are human animals true to their essence, not animals with human frames devoid of this spirit.

Dr. Saroj Kanta Kar finds the philosophy of *Mahimādvaita* tallying with *Upaniṣadas*, *Advaita* of Āchārya Śaṅkara, *Viśiṣṭādvaita* of Rāmānujāchārya and Advaitic Santhas, like Nanak, Kabir, and Pañchasakhas in Odisha. It accepts *Brahman* as the ultimate Reality and Truth. It appreciates *Brahman* as *nirguṇa* and takes *jñāna* and *yoga* to realize the Brahman. It also considers the *saguṇa* aspects of the Brahman, and for this, adopts *Bhakti* and *upāsaṇa* to be equally contributive. The world and individuality of Souls are limitedly real as empirical and cause of bondage. Kar concludes that one can get out of bondage through *jñāna yoga, bhakti marga,* and Gūru's blessings, even while being engaged in one's *karma*.

Part II provides two papers on Bhima Bhoi, analyzing the Indian santha's oeuvre and his growth as a poet.

Dr. Basanta Kumar Dash reflects on the tenets of Mahima Dharma and assesses Bhima's position in it. In the opinion of Dash, Bhima was the worthy disciple of Mahima Swami, the founder of the cult—that challenged social evils such as casteism, untouchability, and unsubstantiated dogmas prevailing in nineteenth-century India, essentially a period of transition. Insisting on spiritual monism, the cult, Upanishadic in some respect, surrendered to *Alekha,* who is both immanent and transcendent. Bhima talks about humanity's liberation, showing his concern for universalism, humanism, and spiritualism.

Prof. Sarat Chandra Panigrahi considers Bhima Bhoi a spiritual humanist, given his metaphysical vision of reality, religious outlook, moral paradigm, and social bearing. For him, Bhima refuted idol worship, caste system, and ostentatious practices, which are varied manifestations of "*Shunya Purusa.*" He wanted to liberate all from degenerate and exploitative social conventions and to establish humanity based on universal love and brotherhood. Seeking collective salvation even at his own cost, his longing for humanism aims to remove ignorance and discover humanity in man. His all-embracing love emanates from the vision of the Unity of Being to empathize with all (for "all are blessed equally"). Panigrahi stresses that Bhima's choice is unequivocal as he suffers every pang of his fellow beings; their sorrow and suffering "pierce my (his) heart."

Part III carries the English rendering of *Stuti Chintāmaṇi* and five select Bhajans.

Chapter 5 gives vent to the prose rendering of select cantos of *Stuti Chintāmaṇi*. Dr. Gagan Behari Das, the translator, finds the work representing the quintessence of the marginalized tribal poet's evaluation of a perverted world, the world made pure by God but destroyed by evil power—pride, hatred, corruption, avarice, intolerance, domination, and violence. In meek submission, the poet complains before God to reform the violated paradise, recover gifted life, destroy evil, and otherwise save the miserable world from disease, decay, and death. Das accepts Bhima's prescription to save the hopeless and hapless world through kindness and love and wishes to let the Almighty's glory shine splendidly.

Satya Siladitya Kar decodes the concept of Brahman in the Indian traditional knowledge system. He compares it with the ideas and philosophy of the Mahima Cult, as reflected in the works of Bhima Bhoi. In Kar's opinion, while accepting Brahman as indeterminate and inaccessible as per the assertion of the age-old Indian scriptures, Bhima adds a new dimension. At points, Bhima identifies Mahima Gosain, the founder of the cult, as the Brahma incarnate. At the same time, he discovers the Ineffable Cosmic Principle in

everything—both living and nonliving. Kar has transcreated five select Bhajans of Bhima Bhoi to drive home his point of view.

The critical analysis of *Stuti Chintāmaṇi*, *Brahma Nirupana Gita,* and *Nirbeda Sadhana* is placed in part IV. Prof. Ram Chandra Majhi brings out the philosophical views on God, the world's origin, man's relation to God, and the way of life man should adopt, which is implicit in *Stuti Chintāmaṇi*. We find two conceptions of God—one is highly abstract and metaphysical, and the other is a personal God. Majhi states that man has many misconceptions about himself, the world, and God because of *Maya*. Based on Bhima's ideas, proper knowledge, a virtuous life, and unconditional devotion to God emancipate man from all miseries of life. The significant contribution of *Stuti Chintāmaṇi* lies in the conception of a casteless society, a religion sans rituals and idols, and a life dedicated to God and the welfare of fellow beings.

Dr. Nandini Mishra explores the fourfold aspects of Bhima's *Gitaatattva*. Bhima Bhoi's five different Gitas, namely *Shrutinisedha Gitā, Aṣtakavihārī Gitā, Ādianta Gitā, Brahma Nirupaṇa Gitā, and Brahmasanjukta Gitā* give expression to his conception of Reality. Mishra reviews *Brahma Nirupaṇa Gita* and its *shunyata*-centric metaphysics. In her opinion, Bhima believed "*Shunya Brahman"* to be the ultimate Reality who alone can save humanity from the deplorable situation when the people are misguided by other *dharmic* institutions. So paying deep devotion to Mahima or Shunya Brahman is necessary. In the *Brahma Nirupana Gita*, he suggested that deep commitment is possible through desireless devotion or '*niskama bhakti*', termed *Brahmabhakti*. This is how the text reveals a rare presentation of a unique amalgamation of faith with the knowledge of Reality.

Dr. Manoranjan Behura, in his analysis of *Sri Sri Nirbeda Sadhana,* explains how *Nirakar* teaches his disciple Bhagaban Das the practice of penance as a spiritual discipline—the core philosophy of the Mahima Cult. Bhima Bhoi held that the *Vedas* were incomplete and incorrect, incomplete because they stop with *Mahasunya*, with Bramha, Vishnu, and Siva, they failed to touch *Mahanitya*, the abode of *Anadi*; wrong because Alekha is supreme, not the Trinity. He is the ultimate Reality, the supreme power on whose behest the sun rises, the moon shines, and the myriad stars revolve on their course. In Behura's opinion, *Sri Sri Nirbeda Sadhana*, a delicate blending of poetry, philosophy, and prophecies, has been artistically crafted, comprising many short stories about *Nirakar* and his phenomenal work.

Incidentally, in part V, three broad-ranging essays give an evaluative viewpoint on Bhima's poetry. While analyzing Bhima Bhoi's life and poetry, Prof. Santosh Kumar Ratha opens up the contested space between the subject, the representation of society, and self-portrayal. He asserts that our scholarship is primarily cognizant of the politics of representation, which requires further expansion of inclusive and open spaces for deeper and more nuanced

analysis. Ratha brings home the point that passionate devotional faith, anecdotes around divinity, incoherent hearsay, and nonfactual guesses have turned Bhima Bhoi's lifelore into a hagiography, somehow directed by the Divine. Nevertheless, his literary creations have sparked novel perspectives, which need to be observed and analyzed, as they are relevant to our lives and society.

Prof. Bijoy Kumar Nanda assesses Bhima Bhoi as a poet and appreciates his advocacy of direct communion with God without intermediaries, disregard for the Hindu pantheon, and logical approach to life. In Nanda's opinion, adapting the common Odia language in his poetry has attracted the attention of general readers and engaged critics and scholars in academic and critical pursuits. His poems have been included in anthologies and are being taught in colleges and universities; doctoral dissertations are written on him and his works; his songs have been broadcast from All India Radio, recorded in Audio Cassettes and invariably listened to in every household; seminars and symposia are being held to discuss his life and poetry. Eventually, all these contributed to lending him canonical status.

Kedar Mishra challenges Odia literature researchers' collection of stories and hagiographic anecdotes about Bhima Bhoi. Whatever has been written suffered from parochialism; historical facts were wrongly interpreted, and conclusions were drawn without proper field study. They did not even bother to meet people who had come directly in contact with Bhima Bhoi, though many of his close associates were alive until the middle decades of the twentieth century. While correcting the misgivings, Mishra analyzes some unique features of his poetry, asserting that his poetry is the spontaneous utterance of his life, time, society, culture, and tradition, and his words are fire and balm; the sickle to repeal and the potion to heal.

Part VI gives a comparative perspective, placing Bhima against Tukaram and Achyutananda and Bhakti Marga of Mahima against that of Panchasakhas. Prof. Madhusudan Pati views Bhakti poetry as "secular illumination" and the Movement as characterized by a democratic, humane outlook. The saint-poets often referred to the material world in the spiritual context. He believes, "We tend to make the opposite—we approach the mystic as liberal humanists. And such has been the prestige and preeminence of the secular view that a sensitive mind feels apologetic about offering an accurate reading of bhakti poetry which, of necessity, would have the character of holy appreciation." Of the many illustrious Oriya Bhakti poets, Pati has chosen Bhima Bhoi to establish his poetry's representative, Pan-Indian quality and explored the uncanny resemblance his personality and poetry bear to those of Tukaram, the great Maratha saint-poet.

Prof. Nigamananda Das explores the occult and humanist creeds in select poetic works of Bhima Bhoi (1855–94) and Achyutananda Das

(1482–1601), two prominent poet-saints of eastern India belonging to two different centuries. Both the poets are credited with creating nuances of the above creeds, commanding prevalent appreciation with numerous followers reciting their poems and bhajans on the traditional devotional trends of the land of their birth. In Das's opinion, they have also created distinct trends of devotion acquired from their *sadhana*, experiments, and experience, which they deliberately propagated for the benefit of the devotees and the common mass.

Dr. Fanindam Deo brings in a comparative study of the *margas* (paths) adopted by Panchasakhas and the Mahima adherents. In his opinion, Sanskrit texts of early Odisha were translated into Odia language with new regional interpretation by Panchasakha in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the nineteenth century, Mahima Swamy and Bhima Bhoi drew upon and reinterpreted metaphysical and religious ideas, practices, and other available traditions. The great works of that era are still with us. They are being interpreted and reinterpreted in the changing historical situation and context in light of a new framework and frame of reference. The Mahima interpretation in the nineteenth century mustered enough strength and power to question the socioreligious dominance and Brahmanic interpretations. Bhima Bhoi went a step forward, reinterpreted, and preached that the "final deliverer" in Mahima Swamy and Lord Jagannath had already appeared in Odisha. The Mahima followers are forbidden to accept anything from Rajak, Brahman, and their associates. Therefore, Odishan/Indian society is not static, not unchanging. Continuity and change are, therefore, integral to the Odishan/Indian culture. Nevertheless, in Bhima Bhoi's works, the Mahima Cult retains its essential attributes, admitting identity, independence, and individuality and offering its numerous cohorts unique modes of coping with life's monotony and myriad contingencies.

Eventually, the conclusion sums up the discussion connecting the various strands of the discourse. The bibliography is exhaustive, documenting the different books/essays and materials available from primary and secondary sources. The modest effort will be fruitful if the book receives the appreciation of discerning readers and contributes a little, at least, to the field of knowledge on the Mahima Cult and Bhima Bhoi. Let us now conclude with the perceptive remark of Plotinus:

> Even here, the august and the extraordinary life is the life in wisdom, here dimly seen, there purely. For their wisdom gives sight to the seen and power for the fuller living and in that tenser life to see and become what is seen . . . In virtue of this essence, life endures, the Intellectual-Principle endures, and the Beings stand in their eternity. (Plotinus)

Given the above, the modest venture to publish the book "A Critical Analysis of Bhima Bhoi and the Mahima Cult" captures the attributes of Bhima's multidimensional personality and the nuances of his variegated work on the Mahima Cult. The primary objective, however, is to encourage, enlighten, and inspire today's youth.

The editor would like to sincerely thank Dr. Madhab Chandra Mishra, Former Principal of Barbil College, Keonjhar, Odisha ; Prof. Kshiti Bhusan Das, Vice Chancellor of Central University of Jharkhand, Ranchi, and Late Debendra Kumar Dash, the noted littérateur of India, for their insightful suggestions and inspiring inputs, but for which this book might not have taken the desired shape.

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Finally, as expected, this book would expose international readers to a renegade and improvised Indian faith with a considerable following. It would serve the needs of students and scholars in India and abroad, reposing interest in Culture Studies and Comparative Religion.

Happy Reading.[5]

NOTES

1. Mishra, Saubhagya Kumar (Tr.) (1992) Laxmikanta Mohapatra, *Jibana Sangita II* (1942) (A Lover's Complaint), *Modern Indian Literature: An Anthology* Vol. I, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. The other quotes are taken from this text.

2. Mohanty, Niranjan (Tr.) (1992) Kuntala Kumari Sabat, *Viswarupa O Premaswarup* (1935) (Cosmic Form and the Image of Love), Ibid.

3. Padhi, Bibhu (Tr.) (1992) Baikunthanath, *Jatra Sangita* (1970) (The Song of the Journey), Ibid.

4. Mishra, Saubhagya Kumar (Tr.) (1992) Bhima Bhoi, *Stuti Cintamani*, 31, (1950) (A Prayer to the Lord), Ibid.

5. The editor acknowledges the contribution of Prof. Saubhagya Kumar Mishra, Prof. Niranjan Mohanty and Prof. Bibhu Padhi, whose English translations of some Oriya lines have been taken to substantiate the points of view.

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