

Bhima Bhoi: The Philosopher for the Upliftment of the Downtrodden

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Abstract

The paper deals with the Philosophy of Bhima Bhoi expounding Mahimā Dharma. The thrust of the paper is to highlight the arguments offered by Bhima Bhoi against caste - system and upliftment of the downtrodden who are exploited by the higher class. There is an attempt to show Bhima Bhoi's empathy and concern for the fellowmen and to help to overcome to come out of their suffering. He has tried to explain the basic tenets of religion proper to purge all the rituals, dogmas, blind beliefs from the so called religious which instead of uplifting man to higher status make them to behave like animals. In order to do this Bhima Bhoi pleaded for spiritual humanism whereas living beings be treated with compassion.

Keywords: Mahimā Dharma, Bhima Bhoi, Upliftment, Spiritualism, Caste System, Humanism, Vedāntic Mukti.

The founder of Mahimā Dharma is Mahimā Gosain but the chief exponent and spokesperson is Bhima Bhoi. He is a poet of eminence, a humanist of high order with a superb vision and world-view, an epoch making eyeopener with solemn rededication to the service of man. He revulcanises and vibrates the elites and the commoners. Prof. C. R. Das in his book '*A Glimpse into Oriya Literature*' explains the role of Bhima Bhoi for social upliftment as follows, "Mahimā Dharma was the last protest of saints against the established Hindu religion. It was not a Buddhist movement, neither had it to do anything with the Vaishnava way of worship, it did

not believe as a religion in getting the sanction of the king to be able to survive and flourish and it proclaimed an open revolt against the externalist obsessions in religion. It flourished out of the courts, out of the influences of the king's mace, flouted the superiority of the Brāhmins and registered most of its followers from the lowliest and the downtrodden in society. It was an effort to give to those who stood at the lowest in a status-infested society, a real sense of human dignity and sought to raise them up as equals and devotees.”¹

Bhima Bhoi was not a system-builder in philosophy propounding mere abstract theories but he was committed to translate theories into practice. He was opposed to Brāhminism as he could find there is a gap between true religion and religious behavior. He tried to arouse rational awakening in human beings so that they can progress in proper direction, though Bhima Bhoi is said to be a reformer but his approach is radical and revolutionary. The writing of Bhima Bhoi is taken as the bible of Mahimā Dharma. His literary works include Bhajana Mālā, Stutichintāmaṇi, Brahma Nirupaṇa Gita and others which is not meant for Mahimā cult alone but a message for all to overcome the degeneration of values in society.

He was born of a poor parentage and also in a tiny dark corner of Odisha which was, so to say, cut off from the main stream of Odishan culture. But it is astonishing that he could be the beacon light of one of the unique religious movements. Bhima Bhoi's poetic genius and philosophic uniqueness owe its origin not to his own activity alone but by the grace of the Lord.

One chief motivation which stands out in and through the writings of the philosopher – poet Bhima Bhoi is his utter concern and empathy for fellowmen and the fervent zeal to help them come out of their stage of decadence and sufferings. Every now and then one comes across a couplet expressing his deep agony at the state of affairs in his time. He obviously lived at a time when society was passing through the most difficult trauma. His deep agony finds classic expression when he prays to God that that “he is no more able to withstand the suffering of beings around him. He is prepared to court the condemnation of hell in lieu of the upliftment of all”²

Bhima's concern for fellow human beings did not stem from a theoretical conviction of unity but from the innermost core of his heart. Devaluation of values, degenerate religious practices and social discrimination deeply moved him. He prayed to the almighty to save the humanity from the imminent ruin.

“Whatever few virtuous people are there, please take care of this world and save the world in these vicious times.”³

His prayer continues by praying Lord to take care of the world and humans who are under social and religious exploitation so that they may have a clean mind without any illusion of duplicity of mind. His concern for others is reflected in the following verse of Bhajana Mālā,

“I suffer every pang as the sorrows and sufferings of all beings
pierce my heart”⁴

Bhima Bhoi was critical of idol-worship, observing mechanical rituals and going on pilgrimage. People waste their valuable human life by superficial religious activities forgetting that it is through *ātmabhakti* alone immortality can be achieved. He says “Look how ignorant people are. They fall at the feet of the idols and promise to offer all delicacies for the fulfillment of their prayer. They are mere statues without consciousness. How can such a God grant you boons?”⁵

Hinduism in its decadent form was instrument in dividing people on caste-line. The sense of innate superiority and inferiority led to inhuman exploitation of the so called low by the so called high. Brāhminism in its degenerate form floated views and doctrines which made people feel that God is prerogative of the selected view. Scriptures were interpreted according to the convenience of the so called upper class. Bhima Bhoi was very much concerned for that suffering humanity.

Bhima Bhoi tells again and again never to discriminate between a *Brāhmaṇa* and *Chāndāla* and never to bother about *jāti* and *gotra*. He observes that God being one and omnipresent, there is only one class, the perceived differences are only result of the divine play. Bhima Bhoi revolted against that caste ridden social order. In our traditional caste system *Śūdras* belong to the lowest category. He preached and practiced a casteless society and tried to establish the view that *Śūdras* are as important as *Brāhmins*. Class division is there to fulfill the need of the society by human beings, but all of them are equal, none is superior or inferior as *śunya purusa* is present in all irrespective of any caste and he has no virtue or sin. He says-

“*Sadā Sampūrnare Samāna
tāhāranāhin pāpapūnya,
jāti ajāti tāra nāhin
purichhi sarbaghate sehi.*”⁶

Bhima Bhoi says that all human beings are one. This is the harmonising force in the vision of unity that makes one see the Lord in everything. He says to be compassionate to all beings as all are equal.

“*alekha bhuvan tahin nāhin bada sāna,
samānare dayā drusti sarva jivare.*”⁷

Mahimā dharma gives hope to all that there is only one caste. He says,

“When all became outcastes, Mahimā Swāmi appeared as mighty Lord to turn devotees to one caste.”⁸

He says to all that go through your knowledge that all belong to one class; they are different because of their professional efficiency.

“*Samaste je ekajāti jñāna bale heja,*

Saṁsāre chalibā pāin karichhi bāñijya.”⁹

Those who are really *jñāni* do not accept caste system. The idea of high and low caste reflects ignorance as Lord is present from insects to Brahman. Bhima Bhoi wanted to uproot the vicious and poisonous tree of caste system. Though all human beings are equal but cunning Brāhmins have divided men into high caste and low caste with the consequence of dividing man into conflicting camps. Therefore, the dictum of Mahimā dharma is that if you search for *mukti*, then forget *jāti* and if you search for *jāti* forget *mukti*.

His surging love for his fellowmen made him appear as a noncompromising crusader against social discrimination. Bhima Bhoi wanted to bring home the spirit of unity by fostering the Vedāntic ideals through his writings. Spiritualism admits of no distinctions of caste, creed and colour. This view follows from his conviction that man is potentially divine, so the question of discrimination does not arise. The practice of spiritualism consists in cultivation of cardinal values like love, compassion, non-violence etc. According to Bhima Bhoi, the distinction of caste is man-made and does not enjoy the sanction of scriptures. He says-

“Tini brahmāṇḍare lodiāsa tumdbhe eka jana eka jāti” ¹⁰

You go around the three worlds and you will find that there is only one caste. Equality is the central theme of Mahimā Philosophy. Bhima Bhoi says in Brahma Nirupaṇa Gīta- X

“When it comes to brahma bhakti, there is no scope for inequality. Whoever entertains such thought would be in hell.”¹¹

The Lord is very merciful, so all are equal before him, either male or female. In B.N.Gita -X, he says-

“In the above of Alekha
Nobody is important or unimportant
Everybody is blessed equally.” ¹²

Bhima Bhoi appears as an ardent fighter for the cause of women who were under subjugation and were prevented from spiritual *Sādhanā*. He argues that there is no logic in making a distinction man and woman. He says-

“As the two (men and women)
Emerge from the same reality
Both these varnas are identical.
The level that a man can go can also be reached by woman.”¹³

Bhima Bhoi gives equal status to woman which is very rare in social philosophy of most of the saints. He gives rational justification for this.

“Ke abā stiri ke abā purusa sarvajana ekākāra” ¹⁴

Bhima Bhoi wished for the salvation of humanity. Salvation for him implies a life of perfection. He did not seek for Vedāntic mukti. His vision for his followers was that of society of men and women who would not only share and care for one another but would also be imbued with love for the rest of creation. His notion of salvation is thought in terms of liberation from a degenerate exploitative socio-religious system and establishment of humanity on the ideals of universal love and co-existence.

The conception of society according to Bhima Bhoi does not rest on the reality of man and human interest but on the essential identity of all existence. It is a vision of spiritual community where well-being of the rest is taken into consideration and man being the most rationally developed ought to shoulder the responsibility of taking care of the rest of the creation. The all - embracing love emanating from the vision of unity led him to empathise for all. His Vedāntic conviction is inevitably manifested in form of socialistic thinking. In a true religion there is no room for privilege on class - consciousness. Everyone has the right to realize perfection. It is open for all irrespective of caste and creed. This shows how spirituality in the practical domain takes the form of socialism. His spiritual vision expresses itself in a mode of holistic living where every other is treated as expression of one's own self. He pleads for welfare of all. Bhima Bhoi's humanism can only serve as the panacea for the ills that have overtaken the contemporary society.

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