

8. Growth and Development of Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma and its widespread impact on Odisha in 19th Century

Dr Raghmani Naik

*Assistant professor in History,
NSCB (Govt. Lead) College (Affiliated to Sambalpur University)
Dist. Sambalpur, Odisha*

email: raghumaninaik@gmail.com

Abstract

Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma in Odisha was founded by Mahima Gosain. He was the obscure prophet of Odisha who had left behind a new religion and a new organization behind him. He was against idol worship and believed in one formless God. Mahima Gosain was absolutely innocent of modernization. Therefore, Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma was autochthonous to the core and was deeply rooted in the Indian traditions. The religious movement which Mahima Gosain started was perhaps, the most revolutionary in the religious history of modern India. Its summon bonum is humanism. Its credential pins around the deliverance of man. It prescribes the path of complete surrender to Alekha Brahman for transmigration of Soul. While the other socio-religious movements of the last quarter of 19th century were confined to educated people in the urban centres of India, Mahima Dharma with its simple philosophy could reach the common people in the villages of Odisha and assumed the dimension of a mass movement. This movement became so significant that it may be regarded as the harbinger of renaissance in Odisha. It harped at the idolatrous, polytheism, caste system, untouchability, domination of priesthood, religious superstition and social obscurantism, animism and barbaric custom. Both Descriptive and Library documentation method have been adopted with analytical and historical perspective for the present study. The important findings of this research work are that it was very rationalistic and put emphasis on the purification of human consciousness both for before death and after death life.

Keywords: *Mahima Gosain, caste system, Idolatry, monism.*

Introduction

Mahima Gosain was the founder of Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma or Alekha Mahima Dharma or Mahima Dharma in Odisha. He was the contemporary of Raja Ram Mohan Ray, Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Dayananda Saraswati. An obscure prophet, he left behind him a new religious organization which dispensed with idol worship and believed in one formless God. While Ram Mohan Ray was influenced by western ideas and culture, Mahima Gosain was absolutely innocent of modernization (Utkala, 1873). Therefore, Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma was autochthonous to the core and was deeply rooted in Indian traditions. The religious movement which Mahima Gosain started was perhaps the most revolutionary in the religious history of modern India. Its essential character is humanism.

Its message is the deliverance of man. It prescribes the path of complete submission to Alekha Brahman for transmigration of Soul. While the other socio-religious movements of the last quarter of 19th century were confined to educated people in the urban centres of India, Mahima Dharma with its simple philosophy could reach the common people in the villages of Odisha. It almost became a mass movement in the hilly areas of Odisha. This movement became so significant that it may be regarded as the harbinger of renaissance in Odisha

In the last quarter of 19th Century, Indian society was caught up in the 'Vicious Circle' created by religious superstition and social obscurantism. There was compound of magic, animism and superstition in Hinduism. With the advent of British reign, raised high hopes following the spread of renaissance, reformation and resurgence in the nineteenth century. Some of superior European ideas such as liberalism, rationalism and humanism were introduced to the intellectual sphere of Odisha. Inspired by such ideas, the Christian missionaries launched a major attack on Hinduism by describing it as a 'pagan and idolatrous religion laden with barbaric customs' (Campbell, 1864). Barbaric as for the the Indian, they responded to the attack under the leadership of an elite group of social reformers namely Raja Ram Mohan Ray, Dayanand Saraswati, Rama Krishna Paramhansa and Vivekanand and others.

Apart from these well-known reformers, some orthodox section in the hindu communities also felt a strong desire to revitalize and rationalize the indian society with a new religious fervor. Out of all

these developments, emerged series of socio-religious reform movements in India and rise of Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma in Odisha was one of them. Numerous abusive practices for instance Sati system, Infanticide, Purdah system, dowry system, widow celibacy, early and Unequal marriage, Polygamy, Kulinism, Debadasi system, Meriah (human sacrifice) were looming large in the firmament of Odisha. Furthermore, illiteracy, ignorance and impoverishment were the order of the day. In this critical point of time, the Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma proved to be a blessing on the people.

In the context of social, political and religious changes Odisha was indeed a virgin land for the rise of the Satya Mahima Dharma. It originated in the second half of the 19th century. It took its birth out of the two great religions i.e. Hinduism and Buddhism. Mahima Dharma is the last protest of saints against the established Hindu religious order. Satya Mahima Dharma, literally 'the glorious Dharma', represents a contemporary ascetic tradition in Odisha. It is a new ascetic religion which is still in its making. Mahima Dharma contains the essence of all the cults of the world.

Methodology

Both descriptive and library documentation method has been adopted with an analytical and historical perspective for the present study. Besides that the archival materials like the then journals, newspapers; letters, books, articles and internet archives and e-books etc. are considered for the research article. Through this method information about the condition of Odishan society, social dogmas and religious belief has been extracted to make the article informative.

Objectives of the Study

Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma is a reformative religious sect within Hindu fold. So, the primary objective of the study is to enlighten its origin, growth, spread and response by people. This research article throws light on why a large number of lower strata of the society tilted towards this religion and made it a mass movement in Odisha.

Literature Survey

Many works have been written on Mahima Dharma of Odisha. Among them, the writings of Biswanath Das's Bhagavatsara Satya Dharma and Satya Mahimadharm Itihasa, have mentioned only the philosophy of Mahima Dharma, different types of Mahima Dharmis, food habits, different Darshans and description of Parambrahman and Advaitabad but he did not give any reference to the base of this

religion and impact on Odishan Society. Achyutananda's Malika, Sridhara Gosain's Sidha Chandrika and Gangadhar Baba's Mahima Samhita only refer to the code of conducts, duties of Mahimaites, ritual practices, philosophy of life but they have not mentioned in details about the origin, development and impact of Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma on Odisha in 19th century. Even from the writings of Kshetrabasi Baba's Prabudha Parana and Mahindra Baba's Mahim Kalpataru, one can get information about the life of Mahima Gosain, Bhima Bhoi, Biswanath Baba and certain code of conducts for the followers but they have mentioned very little on the genesis, growth and impact of Mahima dharm. Though the writings of Bhima Bhoi' like Bhajanamala, Bhabisiya Gupta Malika, Nirguna Mahatmya and Stuti Chintamani contain a number of devotional songs, predications but a little reference is cited about its birth and spread. Therefore, the focus of the research paper is to highlight the hidden parts of the growth and development of Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma in Odisha in 19th Century.

Result

Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma with its simple philosophy could reach the common people and became a mass movement in Odisha. This movement became so significant that it may be regarded as the harbinger of renaissance in Odisha. Thereafter, there is a tremendous impact on Odishan Society such as social mobilization, consciousness of health and hygiene and monotheism etc.

Let us discuss briefly the growth, development, spread and impact of Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma in Odisha.

Origin

The great Prabuddha Guru Mahima Gosain, the founder and preacher of Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma is also known as Mukunda Das alias Jogeswar Baba. The early life of Mahima Gosain is shrouded in obscurity. It is said that he hailed from Boudh ex-state and belonged to a Brahmin family. At first, he was in charge of Balasingha Math of Boudh. Legend goes that he revealed himself in a wonderful way during 1826 A.D. in Puri. At that time, he used to sleep on the bare ground and was, therefore, known as Dhulia (dusty) Baba. He lived there for 12 years and during that time he started preaching in the areas of Bhubaneswar, Khandagiri, Udaygiri, Dhauligiri and Cuttack.

During the period of his stay at Puri, he was propagating the theory of Advaitabad which means God is one, there is not 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 Kapilash hill in 1838 in Dhenkal district and meditated for long 24 years (Ghadai, 2016). During the period, he put on the bark of Kumbhi tree. The first 12 years, he lived on fruit which were supplied to him from the forest. So, he was known as 'Phalahari Baba'. For the next 12 years, he lived on milk provided by Raja Bhagirathi Mahendra Bahadur of Dhenkanal.

He attained Siddhi at Kapilash hill in 1862 A.D. From there he came to Balasingha and initiated his first disciple, Jagannath Das and renamed him as 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 Satya Mahima Dharma. Mahima Gosain conferred them the title of Abadhuta when they attained Siddhi or perfection (Ibid).

Preaching of Mahima Gosain

The word Mahima occupies a unique place in Mahima religion. It conveys the meaning of glory and effulgence, Param Brahma and the highest principle. In 'Satya Mahima Pharma Pratipadak', Biswanath Baba gives the description of Mahima as the epitome of glory. He upholds that the existence of the entire world is by virtue of Mahima. He also explains Mahima as perennial, flawless and indescribable (Alekhya) (Biswanath, 1931). Mahima is not an attribute of Param Brahman. Mahima and Param Brahman are one and the same. The name Mahima is Param Brahman itself. He further describes that Brahman alone is the cause of creation. Bhima Bhoi also refers to the opinion of Biswanath Baba in his Stuti Chintamani (Bhoi, p-36).

The teaching of Mahima Gosain did not bear the influence of any other religion. In its own way, the Mahima cult spread its fragrance ubiquitously and allured the attention of the people of Odisha and outside. Mahima Gosain was used to disseminate his divine discourse in the districts of Cuttack, Puri, Ganjam and in the feudatory states of Dhenkanal, Athgarh, Hindol, Boudh, Sonepur as well as in the areas of Sambalpur and Angul where he attracted a large number of disciples particularly amongst the tribals and the classes considered lower in Brahmanical hierarchy. He established a number of centres of Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma known as Ashram or Alekh Tungi.

He preached people in a simple language. Mahima Gosain told I have come to this world for the spiritual upliftment and benefit of my people. So, man created caste discrimination among the sons of one Param Brahman is not accepted in this Mahima Cult (Op.Cit, Utkala).

Universalism and renunciation were the main teachings of Mahima Cult. He had the vision of a casteless and classless society where there would be no exploitation. The Mahima Sect preaches universal brotherhood, non-violence, good neighbourhood, peaceful co-existence, freedom from greed, kindness for all including birds, animals, and insects.

Principle of Non- Dualism

The Mahima Cult urges for pure Non-Dualism. According to it, God is one and none next to him. He is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent. He is the supreme soul and the cause of the creation of the universe. He is also without form (Nirakar), inexpressible (Avyakta), without body (Adeha), without name (Anam), without any feeling (Nirvikara) and supreme God (Parameswar). He is present in every creature starting from insect to man.

Teacher or Guru occupies a pivotal position in the teachings of Mahima Gosain. A teacher or Guru can show the path of Deliverance. Without him practice of dharma is worthless. He can show path to a disciple and guide him for attaining transmigration of Soul. Bhima Bhoi has mentioned that without the grace of Mahima Gosain, he would not have realized the God. Thus, Guru occupies lofty position among the Abdhuta monks.

Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma believes in the principle of **Vasudhaivakutumbakam**. The Mahima doctrine conceives the whole universe as a single family and desires the welfare of all. Happiness for all and peace to all is the motto of this religion. Even, the life of one may be tinged with sorrows and sufferings but one should pray for the happiness of others. There lies the true humanity. This gospel finds its fullest expression in the words of Bhima Bhoi as, 'May my life go to hell but the world be delivered' (**Mo Jivana pachhe narke padithau, Jagata udhara heau**). Principle for '**Satsanga Gosthi**' or 'Common meal for all' was another notable feature of Satya Mahima Dharma. This was introduced by Mahima Gosain himself at Kashipur in Dhenkanal to show that 'all souls are equal, because they worship the one Brahman.' The food for all is prepared by the household devotees under the open sky and it was taken together by all.

About the 'Theory of Creation' Mahima Gosain has given his own view. This world has not come into existence by mixing of atoms, Purusha and Prakrit. Rather it has been created by the Alekha

Prabhu. He is pure and without any vice. He is the root of all creations and causes. Hence, he should be worshipped as the creator of the universe.

The Essence of Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma

The key features of Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma are asceticism, a caste-denying character, and a conception of God that lies between heno - and monotheism. The followers of Mahima Dharma worship Mahima Alekh as the highest, unwritten (alekha), indescribable, and only God. Mahima Alekh is conceived to be sunya - the void all and nothing (Cuzy, 2004). This God can only be approached by meditation, an ascetic life-style, and ritual practices and is thus opposed to idol worship.

The Mahima dharmis do not touch Prasad or Tulsi leaf or medicine. They entertain no casteism or idolatry or believe in spirits. They play no games, move with no sanyasini, sit under no canopy and domesticate no birds or animals. They do not accept alms from astrologers, prostitutes, barbers, Brahmins, Kshatriyas (Rajas) and Chandals. Like the Vaishnavas, they wear no sacred threads, no tilak or mark of Vishnavism, no garland of beaded tulsi. They take no dinner, touch no food which is too salty or too sweet or too bitter. They perform Sarana and Darsana, beg food only once from a family, stay only a day in a village. They practise truth, non-violence and believe in immortality and rebirth. Born in an ambience of suppression and distrust, Mahimaism opposed the spread of Christianity and Vaishnavism.

The followers of Satya Mahima Dharma were prohibited from worshipping idols and taking part in traditional rituals. They preached the equality of human beings because they believed in the uniform presence of formless God in every human being. Therefore, they rejected caste differences. They saw the Raja-Brahman combination and their association as the cause of their miseries and the Lord Jagannath as their protector. So, the Mahimaitees tried to burn the image of Jagannath image to equalize all communities (Nepak, 2005). No Sanyasis in Mahima Dharma was allowed to live a secluded life in the forest. He had to follow a wandering life carrying always the message of Mahima Param Brahma.

Spread of Mahima Dharma and mahaparinirvan of Mahima Gosain

Mahima Gosain made Govinda Das his first disciple and gradually many disciples including the great Biswanath Baba were produced. Bhima Bhoi of Rairakhol became his second disciple. From 1862 to 1875 Mahima Dharma spread through the nook and corner of Odisha. He preached his doctrine in

Odia. His ideas found expression through the writings of Bhima Bhoi, who expressed it very in simple and lucid language. In 1874, he realized that his time to go back to the absolute void was near. He started for his abode at Joranda in Dhenkanal district known as Mahima Gadi or seat of Mahima Gosain. He renounced his mortal body on his own accord in 1876 on the 14th day of the bright fortnight of Phalguna (February- March). The disciples of Mahima Gosain became famous as Mahima monks or Alekha Sanyasi (Op.Cit.Ghadai).

The locally specific configuration of Indian ascetic, Vedic (Brahmanic) heritage and its indigenous critique reveals a syncretistic feature in Mahima Dharma. Mahima Dharma can thus be seen as a popular tradition of asceticism, which fits well into the heterogeneity and syncretism of Indian local traditions. The affirmation of 'anti –Brahmanism' might indicate the local configuration of power connected to the ascetics' patrons who represent village headman from non- Brahmanical origin.

Impact of Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma on Hindu Society

Mahima Dharma had an immense contribution to the Religious Movement of the 19th Century in Odisha. Mahima Dharma emerged as a challenge to the existing Hindu superstitions and idol worship by rejecting all Gods, Philosophers, Religions, Temples, Mosques and Churches. It had a tremendous repercussion on the religious life of Odisha. The main phenomenon of this cult from the religious point of view was the recognition of One God who was Alekha Brahma, who cannot be described in words or figures. Therefore, he would not be worshipped through manmade Idols. Mahima faith was based completely on Monotheism whereas the Hindu Religion was based on Polytheism as they obey Brahman and all other minor deities of thirty three crores in number. As a result, the Hindus considered the Mahima Cult as opposed to Hinduism. On the other hand, common people followed Satya Mahima Dharma to escape from elaboration of rites and rituals and domination of priests. Non-possession of property was one of the foremost aims and objectives of this religion. The followers of this religion renounced the worldly life and were leading a life of nomad.

Some of the tremendous impacts of Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharm on Odishan Society in 19th century are briefly discussed below:

i) Ahimsa – the basic tenet of Mahima Dharma

Animal sacrifice was considered a big remonstrance in the worship of Param Brahma in Mahima Dharma. Therefore, the disciples continued to perform Balyalila for their worship in which sweets,

'Chura' 'Mudhi' (dry rice) etc were offered to Mahima Param Brahma and distributed among the children. It stood for the purity of heart without any violence and selfishness. Therefore, the followers strictly followed Ahimsa or non-violence and led a peaceful life. They stood for world peace and against war. They preached as well as practised "Shanti Ahimsa" (peace and non-violence). Though moral and spiritual upliftment was the motto of every religious faith, Mahima Dharma was taking initiative for the spiritual well-being of its followers.

ii) Social Mobilisation - A Significant metamorphosis of Orthodox and Caste Ridden Society

Another great outcome of Satya Mahima Dharma on Odishan society was Social mobilization and development of inter dining among the communities. Tungis or ashrams were erected at different places for Sanyasis and 'Melas'(Mahima functions) were organized to congregate large people to dine together from one kitchen irrespective of caste and creed. Once Mahima Gosain told that, kings were always in the habit of extorting the tenants that Brahmins were exploiting the Society imposing various types of ceremonies and rituals. Barbers and washer men were doing menial services to the society. This marked the social inequality. So, the followers of Mahima dharma were forbidden to have food from them and advised to preach against casteism and untouchability. In his preaching people found their suppressed feelings were reflected. They attached to the philosophy and personality of the Mahima Gosain and converted to Mahima Dharma. These rules of the Mahima Dharma produced tremendous impact on the Society over the Hindu Caste system. This helped bring unity and fraternity among the people and the rigidity of caste system and untouchability became minimized.

Indeed, Mahima Dharma stood for a casteless society to free from exploitation. It stood for spiritual socialism and had a scientific outlook to social problems.

iii) Impact of Consciousness of health and hygiene

As per superstition illness was sometimes attributed to evil eye of spirits and malevolent deities. So 'Gunias' (Sorcerers) were required to cure them. Sometimes village 'Vaidyas' (physicians) were requested to prescribe the medicines to cure some disease. The Tribal people believed that different types of diseases were caused by Gods and ancestors. Hence they used to offer sacrifices to cure such diseases. But Mahima Dharma prohibited these medicines from Gunias and village Vaidyas because the villages Gunias were practising the animal sacrifices to protect from black magic. Even western

medicines were prohibited by Mahima Gosain. This cult advised that belief in the Mahima Gosain alone can cure diseases. This Cult also believed that liquid cow dung offered to Supreme Brahman could cure some serious diseases like leprosy (Op.Cit Sahu, p.26).

iv) Monotheism – A great impact on polytheism

Satya Mahima Dharma was based on the principle of one Brahman worship. It was a serious step for the upliftment of the degenerated section of the Hindu Society. In Hinduism, thirty three Gods and Goddesses were worshipped. It was a very expensive religion and based on hard principles. The ordinary people were unable to perform religious activities by inviting Brahmanas and paying costly dakshina. In this context, Mahima Dharma gave a great relief like a balm to such people. People were automatically dragged towards this religion in large number and it became mass religious movement among the rural and tribal areas. People believed in Monism and escaped from thirteen festivals in twelve months in Odisha.

Conclusion

Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma is a revivalism of the Vedantic thrust and a reformist movement of Odisha within the Sanatan Hindu fold. Satya Mahima Dharma is not just a religious sect but a reformist movement, a way of life and a code of conduct. This movement had arisen individually from the Odisha soil which discarded and discouraged the superstitious and complicated rules and rituals of Hinduism. Above all, it severely criticised the Brahminical interpretation of the religion and condemned the role of Brahmins in the religious affairs. In its reformative zeal, it encompassed large number of followers, mainly from lower castes and spread to various parts of the state and outside it.

This religion contains some noble features. It interprets the deep Indian philosophy in such a simple manner that a common man can understand it easily. It accepts the Saguna and Nirguna aspects to appeal the mind of all. It emphasizes that the salvation cannot be achieved through external rites, pilgrimage, etc., or through the worship of lifeless idols of wood or stone. The assistance of the Brahmins is not required for the attainment of liberation. A man can be his own light by practising code of conduct. There is no tantra or mantra to realize the Ultimate. So, only worship to Parama Brahma one can easily bring deliverance.

Satya Sanatan Mahima Dharma had stimulated the social and religious life of the people of Odisha in 19th Century. The common men were attracted towards it because it was free from the ritualistic practices of the Brahmins. Mahima dharma's doctrine was quite different from other religious sects, uninfluenced and unbiased by the prevailing currents of time. Due to its simple principles and philosophy, this religion spread spontaneously in the nook and corner of Odisha and outside.

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