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# Bhima Bhoi

## The Making of a Modern Saint



*Johannes Beltz*

**B**hima Bhoi is one of Orissa's most interesting literary and religious figures of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> He was a disciple of Mahima Gosain, the legendary founder of the Mahima Dharma movement.<sup>2</sup> As the prominent historian Chittaranjan Das (1951: 160) rightly pointed out, 'Although Mahima Gosain was the founder of Mahima Dharma, it was really the works of Bhima Bhoi, the blind poet, that brought home to all people the essence and excellence of the new doctrine.' Indeed Bhima Bhoi's importance should not be underestimated. The major part of the popular devotional poetry that characterizes Mahima Dharma is attributed to him,<sup>3</sup> and as a matter of fact more than one critic has taken him not only to be the successor of Mahima Gosain but also to be the actual propagator of Mahima Dharma.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore Bhima Bhoi protested against almost everything that generally characterizes 'orthodox' Hinduism, that is, the reference to the Veda as a sacred scripture, idol worship, temple cult, pilgrimage, and brahmin priesthood.<sup>5</sup>

### SOURCES AND FIELDWORK

Bhima Bhoi's significance is contrasted by the absence of reliable documents about him.<sup>6</sup> He did not expose any autobiographical details in his writings and the very few references about his life are difficult to understand, and allow contradictory interpretations. The secondary sources such as newspapers and administrative reports are also quite contradictory and confusing.<sup>7</sup> However, we do possess a large number

of stories and legends which are orally transmitted and widely circulated. How to deal with this kind of texts? In some of the existing biographies about Bhima Bhoi, they are quoted without inquiring into their legendary character. In others they are objected to because they do not contain any 'true fact' and are as such without any historical value. I believe these conclusions are misguided when it comes to understanding the meaning and significance of Bhima Bhoi. In fact I decided to systematically collect all those legends and strange stories which are absent in 'scholarly' books. It goes without saying, however, that these stories tell us more about how Bhima Bhoi is imagined and less about him as an authentic historical person. These texts are hagiographic documents and should be valued as such.<sup>8</sup> Thus, this essay is not a historical study about the person who was Bhima Bhoi but rather discusses the impact which he had, and still has today. In other words, starting from the idea that saints are not born but made, I want to look into the complex process of constructing a religious biography. My interest lies in the challenge Bhima Bhoi presented, and still presents for the people who narrate his life story.<sup>9</sup>

Before exposing the many and contradictory ways in which Bhima Bhoi is represented, my fieldwork should be mentioned. From 2000 to 2001 I visited several places in western Orissa which have special links with Bhima Bhoi—Khaliapali, Jatesingha, Kankanpada, and Kandhara. Interviews were conducted among the ascetics of the *Balkaladhari* and the *Kaupinadhari* order, as well as among the lay people. It seems that in western Orissa Mahima Dharma is very popular among the so-called downtrodden communities, and especially among the 'Untouchable' Ganda-Panas. However, people from other communities and higher social strata are also equally attracted to it. I met devotees who are carpenters (*Khabala*), farmers (*Chasa*), oil makers (*Teli*), fisherman, milkman, and weavers (*Meher*). It is reported that even brahmins have accepted this religion; this was an information that I was not able to verify.

I did not interact exclusively with initiated members of the Mahima Dharma sect. The circulated stories of Bhima Bhoi break the boundaries and cross all frontiers of caste and creed in villages and towns. One has to keep in mind that his poems are very popular, not recited by professional artists only.<sup>10</sup> His *bhajan*s (devotional songs) are sung at many occasions, and his *malika*s (prophecies) are widely known.<sup>11</sup> There is something more remarkable about his *bhajan*s; it is said that they possess healing powers. People have been cured from diseases, snake-bites, and possession of evil spirits. It seems that by reciting them and by

praying to Mahima Alekha, barren women can get pregnant. Bhima Bhoi has also become an object of intellectual discussion. During the last decades he has been politically appropriated as a great freedom fighter and a vehement critic of communalism. He is cast as the forerunner of women's emancipation and a great protagonist of Oriya language. He manifests Orissa's contribution to the Indian cultural heritage. For instance, when the Sahitya Akademi asked for a poetic passage from each of the fourteen Indian languages, a couplet of Bhima Bhoi's *Stuticintamani* was chosen.<sup>12</sup> The number of associations, schools, and colleges which are operating in Orissa in the name of Bhima Bhoi are numerous, and several research institutes are created in his name.

As mentioned above, my sources consist of printed books and booklets as well as interviews; therefore a continuity between literature and oral narration may be presupposed. I do consider both categories of texts as equally interesting and authentic. It should be recalled in our analysis that the texts about Bhima Bhoi's life are collected from a variety of people with different social and political backgrounds. The context of each of these texts is specific and requires proper understanding. But in their diversity, all texts are comparable. They imagine the life of Bhima Bhoi and give a coherent sense to it. Beyond their specific context, common topics can be extrapolated and cultural patterns analysed. In this sense my essay is open for further research on hagiography, biography, and autobiographies in an inter-cultural and comparative perspective.

## BHIMA BHOI'S ORIGIN

Hagiographies usually answer the question of the origin of their hero. Let us accept that Bhima Bhoi was a historic person and that he was born in the middle of the nineteenth century. We cannot provide the exact year because the definite answer is not only outside our field of investigation, but also irrelevant to our research. Bhima Bhoi's origin is as mysterious as his life. Let us quote from his magnum opus *Stuticintamani*. Bhima Bhoi repeatedly claims here to originate from a poor Kandha family (that means he is a tribal). He further reports that his father died when he was born. He seems to have lost his mother also, since he calls himself an orphan. The little Bhima Bhoi had therefore to start working at a very young age:

I have no friends nor brothers, no mother no father to save me from the troubles and sorrow. I have no well-wisher nor relations, I am a helpless orphan creature.<sup>13</sup>

Or:

My father left me from the time of my birth keeping me without support in a desperate condition. How could I get food and enjoyment easily if so desired, [...] From the age of twelve I had to spend days tending cattle in the forest.<sup>14</sup>

However, one should keep in mind that the context of these verses indicates an explicit religious meaning. Bhima Bhoi is not reciting biographical data but talks about his guru. He describes his painful existence and asks the guru to save him from that. Bhima Bhoi's major concern is his sorrow and his salvation. Again and again, he narrates how he suffered in his childhood and how he met his guru at the age of four.<sup>15</sup>

One could ask if Bhima Bhoi is not hiding his origins voluntarily. As a true mystic he would have no interest in revealing his family background. Indeed, there are hardly more biographical references in his other poetic creations. The absence of authentic biodata is contrasted by numerous miraculous 'birth stories'. In almost all villages in the region of Kandhara and Redhakhol, stories circulate. One of them reads:

There was a man called Danara Bhoi and he was Kandha. Once he went into the forest in search of some wood and found an abandoned male child on a lotus leaf. He gave the child to his wife who was unable to conceive, and they took care of him.

This is the simplest version of the event, and also very straight because no fantastic religious topics appear. It sounds as if the story could really have happened. Some variations affirm that Bhima Bhoi was an abandoned, illegitimate child. But in all varieties, a consensus exists on the fact that he was found in a palm grove and that his adoptive parents were Kandhas, that is, tribals. The names of his adoptive parents may differ, but it is always a barren woman who needs a child. In some stories a divine element clearly appears: Mahima Gosain comes to know about the pain of the childless Kandha couple and decides to help. The crucial issue remains that Bhima Bhoi has no 'real' parents. On certain occasions I was told that Bhima's birth happened in the same way as Krishna's did, that is, as a divine emanation. The fact that Bhima Bhoi has no biological parents reinforces his holy character.

The divine origin of Bhima Bhoi is reaffirmed and canonized by a current which places Bhima Bhoi in the *pancashakha* tradition.<sup>16</sup> According to this idea. Bhima Bhoi's appearance was predicted by Achyutananda Das, the famous Oriya poet of the fifteenth century. In his *Kalpa Samhita*, he is quoted to have said that Radha would take birth again in the world and will be called Bhima Bhoi. It was also said that she

would be reborn in a Kandha family and that she would have poetic talent. Whilst this idea may be of recent origin, it is nonetheless interesting for our investigation. Through this prediction Bhima Bhoi is integrated into the dominant Vaishnava tradition. What is even more interesting is the fact that this reappropriation has worked very successfully. I was told many times during my interviews that Mahima Gosain and Bhima Bhoi form a couple, like Krishna and Radha. Bhima Bhoi was the Radha of divine eternity; he never came out of a woman's womb (*ayonisambhuta*). Certain *bhaktas* (devotees) declare that Bhima Bhoi was the *avatara* (incarnation) of Bhagavan. Others claim that his father was Alekha Swami. To repeat once again, this statement does not inform us about the real origin of Bhima Bhoi, but rather shows us the manner in which his followers revered him as a divine being.

In general, Bhima Bhoi's poor social background is positively recognized. It culminates in the statement that although born in a poor Kandha family, he still rose to a place of power and praise because of his intelligence. Bhima Bhoi becomes a spiritual guide, a model to follow. In fact, Bhima Bhoi is envisioned as a tribal poet. It is said that in Orissa prior to his coming, only brahmins were recognized as poets, and that Mahima Gosain changed that state of affairs by making Bhima Bhoi the first *Adivasi* poet. This statement ignores that Sarala Das, the author of the Oriya version of the Mahabharata, was a *shudra*. Whether a historical fact or not, Bhima Bhoi is seen as a challenge to the brahmin hegemony. However, one has to keep in mind that this claim is made by non-Adivasis.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the literary elite promote Bhima Bhoi's tribal background to integrate the tribes into the mainstream? One could consider this discourse also as an attempt to reappropriate Bhima Bhoi as an agent for the ongoing Hinduization of autonomous tribal cultures. Being originally a tribal, he becomes the representative of a modern and reformed Hinduism.

It is interesting that Bhima Bhoi also appears as the voice of the subaltern and the underprivileged. An important part of the Ganda-Panas, a caste of so-called 'untouchables' from western Orissa converted to Mahima Dharma and took Bhima Bhoi as a symbol of their own.<sup>18</sup> Bhima Bhoi is seen as one of their own, a poor and a low-caste man. He is praised as the prophet of the dalits affirming their envy of social recognition. Through him, a universal brotherhood is formulated: the 'untouchables' are also Hindus. And they practise the 'true' Hinduism without idols because they know the sacred but hidden meaning of the Vedas.

But again this discourse is contested (whenever the caste factor enters

the discussion, contradictory stories are bound to appear). Indeed, some intellectuals declare that Bhima Bhoi although raised as a tribal, was a brahmin by birth. This claim is based on the stereotype that only brahmins were able to write literature and talk about religious matters. How could a tribal compose such beautiful songs? In order to prove his noble birth, it is recalled that Bhima Bhoi had a fair complexion. Others are more modest in their claims by recognizing that he probably was not born a brahmin but that he was, at least, as educated as a brahmin. By saying this, the supremacy of brahmins is still safeguarded. The debate indicates clearly a social conflict among the so-called higher and lower castes.

It is not only the birth and the social background which are controversially discussed. There is a long-standing debate amongst Indian scholars about the question of where Bhima Bhoi was really born. Joranda, Gramadiha, Jatesingha, Kamrapali, and Kumarkeli are all places where the local people are able to show the lotus pond where the little Bhima Bhoi was found. This is not the place to list or discuss such theories. This question is, again, outside our area of investigation. But I would like to add that this problem does not represent a mere abstract debate. There exists a dynamic competition between different villages, local persons, and institutions; persons develop new stories about the *janmasthan* (birthplace) of Bhima Bhoi, and they are keen to defend their ideas against others. So-called 'scientific' proofs are constructed, schools are named after him, and his statues are erected in order to promote local interests. The person of Bhima Bhoi is imagined and appropriated in many contexts and with diverse intentions. It is interesting to observe how the different positions are negotiated.

## THE BLIND POET

Though Bhima Bhoi never presented himself as a blind person, there exists a hagiographic tradition which declares him blind. Among scholars, contradictory opinions and stories circulate about Bhima Bhoi's blindness.<sup>19</sup> As I have argued already in the introduction of this essay, it is not my aim to discover the 'historic' Bhima Bhoi, that is the person he was in reality. I think that the question of whether he was really blind or not is beyond my field of investigation. However, one should keep in mind that in his compositions, no reference is made to a physical handicap. The few passages where he speaks about blindness could be understood as metaphors: Bhima Bhoi thinks of himself as blind without his guru. Furthermore, he often uses verbs of vision. But instead of arguing why he was not blind, let us adopt another perspective. I suggest taking the accounts of his blindness as interesting texts to look into. In

other words, I suggest looking at his blindness in terms of a hagiographic topic.

His blindness, being without any doubt an important motif of his life story, is generally connected to his first meeting with Mahima Gosain. Keeping in mind the importance of the first encounter between the guru and his *shishya* (disciple) in Indian hagiographic writing, let me quote this story. According to Biswanath Baba (1991: 53), the story of how Mahima Swami (*Prabhu*), who was accompanied by Govinda Baba, came to meet Bhima Bhoi is as follows:

Both the preceptor and his disciple reached the village Gramadiha, which is situated near Redhakhhol, in the middle of the night. In front of the door of Bhima Bhoi's house, Swami called: 'Bhima Bhoi!' Bhima Bhoi heard the voice and was surprised. He replied, 'Who are you? Why are you calling me in the middle of the night?' Hearing this answer from Bhima Bhoi, Prabhu replied, 'We have reached here because of your past virtues. Come quickly!' Hearing this, Bhima Bhoi replied, 'If you have reached here due to my past virtues, then give me the power of vision. I'm blind. If you do so, I'll be informed about my virtues'. Prabhu commanded, 'Receive the power of vision.' By the mercy of Prabhu, Bhima Bhoi suddenly received the power of seeing. Knowing about the miraculous deeds of Swami, he opened the door immediately and went outside. He found the preceptor and his disciple both waiting near the door just like the sun and the moon. Bhima Bhoi prostrated in front of the preceptor and his disciple. Prabhu blessed Bhima by laying his hand on Bhima's head. Then he ordered, 'O Bhima, get up!' According to his order he got up and offered prayers with folded hands. Then he asked: 'O Prabhu, for what reason have you appeared here so suddenly? Please, command kindly and mercifully to the wretched.' Prabhu replied, 'Prabhu has miraculously incarnated in a bodily form in order to preach the Satya Mahima Dharma in the present Kaliyuga. You will be initiated into this dharma.' [...] After that, Mahima Swami clapped his hands thrice on the head of Bhima Bhoi and transferred on him the gift of poetry. This gift would automatically develop from his inner heart in order to spread the glory of the Satya Mahima Dharma. Bhima Bhoi was overwhelmed with joy and offered *saran* at the feet of Swami. He asked him, 'Prabhu, I have seen your feet because you have given me the power of vision. I do not want to see the worldly objects with that outer eye. Prabhu bless me to become unable to see these outer objects.' Swami replied, 'You will get back to your previous stage.'

Bhima Bhoi is presented in this story as a mere disciple of Mahima Gosain. He is not a genuine poet but a servant who has to write what his guru will tell him. Bhima Bhoi resists and states his inability to do this. But Mahima Gosain does not accept his excuses and orders him to fulfil his mission. This is, again, a common topic which can be found in other comparable hagiographies: the saint is always overwhelmed by the presence of his guru, often he refuses to serve him because he finds it too



difficult. In fact, in Biswanath Baba's story, Bhima Bhoi's blindness is used to underline the ultimate authority of Mahima Gosain. Bhima Bhoi's poetic creativity and autonomy are annihilated. He personally has nothing to say. He is just the pen in the hand of his guru.

Interestingly, Biswanath Baba (1991: 56) tells another story about Bhima Bhoi composing his first poetry. It was at the time when Bhima Bhoi was keeping cattle near Redhakhhol. One day, he fell into an old and broken well in Kandhara. Though people tried to help him, he refused to come out. He stayed in the well and told the people that the one who would save him would be the same as the one who had brought him there. So it happened. In the night, he saw a big foot, took it and was drawn out of the well. It is said that from this moment on Bhima Bhoi composed poetry. To my knowledge it is only Biswanath Baba who combined the well story with Bhima Bhoi's first poems. Usually the story is that Bhima Bhoi fell into the well and was saved by Mahima Swami. The fall is seen as a proof of Bhima Bhoi's faith in his guru.

In addition to Biswanath Baba's narrative, I would like to refer to the story of Sur Das, the blind Braj poet. The comparison with Bhima Bhoi is doubly interesting because Sur Das also falls into a well and voluntarily renounces the return of his vision. The choice of blindness strikes a parallel with the story of Bhima Bhoi. Both stories seem to be so similar because we are in the midst of hagiographies where blindness is a religious issue. But if it seems likely that Sur Das was not blind at all—as John Stratton Hawley suggests—what does that mean? If blindness is such an important religious topic, what is the inherent significance of it? Let us quote Hawley (1984: 15) who considers that the account of Sur's blindness 'not only preserves the purity of vision upon which so much hinges in the Varta, but strengthens it: even when Sur sees, he sees nothing but Krishna.'

Let us mention the concept of *darshan* and its significance in Hinduism. The 'look' is the core in the relationship between the deity and the devotee. The eye is a testimony of truth but is, after all, also negligible. The saint who, like God, knows everything does not need to look. Axel Michaels (1998: 257) writes: 'Blindness can be higher knowledge. The visible things can be illusion ...'. This is an important step towards the understanding of the problem. The poets of the *nirguna-bhakti* tradition think that God is in its essence without form and quality (*nirguna, nirakara*). Accordingly then, the visible world is only illusion! In the words of Michaels (1998: 257): 'The true understanding does not need eyes but knowledge and inner vision.'

Given such an insight we may now have gained a better understanding

of the significance of Bhima Bhoi's blindness. I am proposing that it may be considered to be normative within the sphere that is traditionally assigned to rare spiritual humility. In this sense, the blind Bhima Bhoi fits well into the Indian canon of hagiography. His blindness is less an attribute which refers to his physical outlook, or to his physical abilities, than the consequence of his religious attitude. He is preaching the void, the empty. God has no form, and there is no idol to worship. How can this be better illustrated than by the image of Bhima Bhoi as a blind poet? It could also be argued that his blindness permits him to concentrate on god. Sight would allow him to witness other things which may spoil him. The blindness is the culminating point in the narrative about the holy Bhima Bhoi, conveying the intensity of his love for god.

However, we have to understand that the people who imagine Bhima Bhoi as blind do not adhere to the 'rationalistic' discourse on Bhima Bhoi that is typical for the intellectual elite who promote him as a social revolutionary. In the latter case, he is depicted as watching the world with open and attentive eyes. His blindness is read as a metaphor of spirituality. Bhima sees what happens around him as being part and parcel of this world. He saw the nature, the human injustice, the social inequalities, the poverty, and all the problems which humans faced in their lifetime. His altruism, his social engagement are imagined as a reaction to what he saw. It could be that this discourse is quite recent and the result of a more rationalistic appropriation of Bhima Bhoi. This indicates that there is a changing emphasis in the perception of this person.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF A SOCIAL REFORMER

It is said that Bhima Bhoi revolted against all kinds of social evils. He questioned local hierarchies, kings, brahmins, and the traditional role of women. Bhima Bhoi is depicted as the first social revolutionary of modern Orissa. He fought against the British and tried his best to reform Indian society. Bhima Bhoi is further imagined as a saint who sacrificed his personal life for the well-being of other people. He did not renounce his noble mission when people burned down his house, or threw stones at him, or spat at him and threatened him with death. He was driven out of his village and imprisoned several times.<sup>20</sup>

Bhima Bhoi is believed to have questioned the authority of local kings. One old man of the Kankanpada village told me that the Raja Niladri Singh Deo of Sonapur wanted Bhima Bhoi to pass an ordeal through fire in order to test his holiness. But the Raja died of a snakebite

the night before the ordeal was to take place. Bhima Bhoi's integrity as a holy man could not be questioned. It is also said that the attempt of the king to test the holiness of Bhima Bhoi has caused an everlasting malediction of the royal family of Sonepur. Due to this evil king, the family had to abdicate and the royal palace, being abandoned by his owners, was destroyed.

It is also said that Bhima Bhoi opposed caste distinctions (*jatigata vibheda*) and accepted disciples from all communities, even untouchables. According to him there is only one caste, that is, humanity (*manava jati*).<sup>21</sup> In other words, there are only men and women. It is often said that his criticism of caste provoked people to place sanctions on him. They could not bear that he accepted people from all communities and that he treated them equally. There is a related story in which Bhima Bhoi was beaten up and thrown into the well in Kandhara because he was acting against the *jatikuladharmā*. Let us recall that Biswanath Baba (1991: 56) gave a rather different interpretation of the event. According to him, the well story narrates how Bhima Bhoi came to write his first poetry. Again we can see that events and narrative elements can vary and can be used on more occasions than one. In other words, literary topics and motifs can be combined and used in many ways, according to the communicational context in which the narrative is situated. Be it an accident or a royal punishment, there exists today a well in Kandhara which is remembered as the place where Bhima Bhoi was saved by his guru. The old structure has recently been replaced by an enormous concrete construction. With the help of public money, a huge memorial has been erected in order to commemorate the incident. The villagers proudly take the visitors to the well; regular festivals are organized where the obligatory procession path incorporates a trip around the well. Thus, the place of Kandhara has been integrated into the sacred geography of Mahima Dharma.

Bhima Bhoi is further known for being radically opposed to superstition and idol worship.<sup>22</sup> The Census Report of 1911 even stated that he wanted to destroy Lord Jagannath's image in Puri.<sup>23</sup> It is said that he believed that if the image was destroyed, it would convince the Hindus of the futility of their religion, and they would embrace the new faith. In obedience to his command, a body of his followers marched to Puri and tried to break into the shrine of Jagannath. Riots broke out; people entered the temple, and one person died mysteriously. The details of the story are not at issue here but rather the commonly accepted statement that Bhima Bhoi participated in or at least encouraged the attack of the Jagannath temple. According to Anncharlott Eschmann (1975: 10), it seems very unlikely that Bhima Bhoi directed that incident although it

was connected with him. Bhagirathi Nepak (1997: 72) goes a step further and doubts that the attack on Jagannath was sanctioned by Bhima Bhoi. Biswamoy Pati even questions the participation of any Mahima Dharmee in the attack. He rightly observes that 'this event is virtually forgotten by the followers of the cult today, who are almost embarrassed about it' and concludes that the colonial powers invented a conspiracy in order to stop the growing Mahima Dharma movement (Pati, 1997: 132). Again, this conclusion seems exaggerated, as Ishita Banerjee's recent article (2001) has shown.

The question remains as to why the event has been forgotten or why it is voluntarily ignored by the Mahima Dharmees of today. Nepak (1997: 71) has drawn the attention to the fact that Bhima Bhoi was an admirer of Jagannath. He did not question the existence of the god, but the worship of a piece of wood in Puri. One has to keep in mind that the Mahima Dharmees appropriated Jagannath as the first disciple of Mahima Gosain.<sup>24</sup> In other words, Orissa's *rashtra devata* was peacefully incorporated into the Mahima Dharma religion. That seems to be the reason why the so-called 'fanatic' attack on the Jagannath temple of Puri did not enter the collective memory of the Mahima Dharmees. The new Mahima Dharma has replaced the Jagannath cult and the Mahima *gaddis* at Khaliapali and Joranda are holier and more important than the Jagannath's *tirtha* in Puri.

## WOMEN EMANCIPATOR OR RENUNCIANT?

It is widely accepted that Bhima Bhoi lived with four women, two 'worldly' and two 'spiritual' consorts: Sumedha, Rohini, Saraswati, and Annapurna. According to different stories, Sumedha, Rohini, and Saraswati were offered to Bhima Bhoi as servants. Their parents were staunch followers of Mahima Dharma with a deep admiration for Bhima Bhoi.

Regarding Annapurna, things are different since she joined her own will. It is said that she followed only the order of Mahima Gosain. But as a matter of fact she stayed with Bhima Bhoi having the strong desire to offer him her *seva* (service). After Bhima Bhoi's death, the management of the ashram came into her hands. Concerning Bhima Bhoi's relationship with her, one piquant question remains. Did he adopt a life of chastity? Interestingly most Mahima followers pretend that he was never married and that his relations with women were only 'spiritual'. It is said that Annapurna was living a life of austerity and moral purity. It is even claimed that she was a goddess. As his principal spiritual consort, her shoes (*paduka*) are till today kept together with Bhima Bhoi's in Khaliapali and are worshipped on special occasions. Concerning the nature of their

relationship it is generally stated that it was purely spiritual. In an interview I was told this:

Annapurna, a brahmin girl, devoted her life to Bhima Bhoi and came with him to Khaliapali. Annapurna's relatives were not happy with that. They spread the rumour that Bhima Bhoi had abducted the brahmin girl. Furious as they were, they went to see Bhima Bhoi. They disrobed him. But what did they discover? They saw that he had no penis. After that they understood that his relationship with Annapurna was only spiritual.

But what about the other women? Surprisingly they got pregnant. Did Bhima Bhoi beget children although he was not supposed to procreate? How can one justify this? A story reads:

Narayan Das and Mohan Das, the fathers of Sumedha and Rohini, came once to Bhima Bhoi and complained that they had not gained anything from delivering their daughters to him. Then Bhima Bhoi pasted vermilion on the forehead of Sumedha and Rohini. As a result, Kapilesvar, a son and Labanyabati, a daughter, were born.

In another story it is said that Sumedha's mother came once from Ragapali to Khaliapali to pray to Bhima Bhoi. She wanted to take *darshana* in Khaliapali. She prayed to him that her daughter should always be happy. For her, it was clear that being a woman she should also become a mother. Bhima Bhoi smiled and promised to fulfil her desire smearing some *bibhuti* (holy ashes) on Sumedha's forehead. And, of course, the result came immediately. After three days she gave birth to a son.

However, some texts suggest that his followers, or at least a section of them, disapprove of this development. Let us quote an interesting passage from a letter written by the Assistant Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces (no. 3069-161), dated 17 August 1881. In the sixth paragraph, the author writes about Bhima Bhoi:

(Bhima Bhoi) exercised great influence over his followers. The relations existing between him and a female companion, however, excited suspicion among his adherents, who, however, did not venture to question the purity of his conduct until the woman became pregnant. Bhima endeavoured to deceive his followers by telling them that the woman would give birth to Arjun, who would root out all unbelievers. The(y) believed this story, and waited until the child was born, when to their great surprise, they found that the woman gave birth to a girl. Bhima accounted for this by saying that it had recently been revealed to him that the woman would give birth to a female, who would destroy all the unbelievers by means of her charms. The child, however, died a few days later, and Bhima then tried to mislead his followers still further by saying that the fairy had quitted [sic] this world because she had found it filled with vices of mankind. He was now deserted by most of his followers, who formed a separate faction but he is still highly adored and honoured by the remainder.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly this is the story about a child who died shortly after his birth. In other words, the mentioned child is neither Kapilesvar nor Labanyavati. Further, the rather negative characterization of Bhima Bhoi needs our attention. He is described as misguiding and cheating his followers. The same radical criticism is expressed by the authors of the Census of India from 1911 who repeated the same story. In the same year, in 1911, B.C. Mazumdar wrote his famous article entitled 'Alekhism' as a part of his book *Sonpur in the Sāmbalpur Tract*. In this article we find the same statement that Bhima Bhoi begot children and that this fact created much dissent among his followers. However, his judgement is less harsh. Let us quote the passage (Mazumdar, 1911: 34):

Bhima Bhoi as a matter of fact did beget two children—one a son and another a daughter—on two women, who became nuns and lived at Khaliapali in Bhima Bhoi's math. Both these women are still living at Khaliapali with the children begotten upon them. It was nineteen years ago that first a daughter and then after two months a son were born having Bhima Bhoi for their father. The disciples were no doubt very much shocked at it, but Bhima Bhoi explained it to them that he brought one male and one female child into existence with a view to give to the world one ideal woman and one ideal man. How these two ideal beings are behaving now could not be ascertained by me.

It is certain that the existence of women within the ashram was the major reason for the twist between Joranda and Khaliapali. It is told that some ascetics came from Joranda to burn down Bhima Bhoi's ashram in Gulunda because he had transgressed the rules regarding procreation. In fact, an important section of the Joranda ascetics regard him as a heretic. It seems very clear that in their mind the propensity to procreate is the root of all evil. According to their ascetic ideal, the perfect man is one who gains full control over sexual desires. The ascetics are expected to contemplate every morning on the organs of generation without becoming stimulated so that ultimately complete detachment from sexual proclivity might be obtained. That is, their minds are able to dominate their bodily functions. According to that ideal, a holy man has no sexual feelings. But one should keep in mind that though Joranda represents the most powerful and influential Mahima Dharma monastery today, other 'heretic' currents do exist apart from Khaliapali where till today women are living as *sannyasinis* in the ashram. The Satya Svadhin Mahima Dharmis of Kardula went even a step further. Having founded their independent 'sect' they demand that all members get married. It is said that because Bhima Bhoi was a *grhastha* (householder), all members of their group should be *grhasthas* also.<sup>26</sup>

One should, indeed, interpret this conflict in a positive way. I was told that Bhima Bhoi went to Joranda after the death of Mahima Gosain and that he was terrified by the local form of worship. He left the place swearing that he would never return and founded in 1877, under the patronage of Raja Bahadur Niladhar Singh Deo, his own ashram in Khaliapali where he could accept women as disciples. In this sense, Bhima Bhoi can be seen as advocating the emancipation of women. He said that there is no difference between men and women in his ashram at Khaliapali. It is reported that he chose Annapurna, a brahmin woman, as a companion which was an affront to the traditionalists who do not approve of any relationship between a low-caste man and a high-caste woman. In fact, Bhima Bhoi's ashram can be seen as a counterpart to the ashram of Joranda.

But there are other stories. Bhima Bhoi's chastity is contested by his own writings. Indeed, in his *Cautisha Granthamala*, he admits to having several wives (!) and made explicit erotic references.<sup>27</sup> But again, this fact is voluntarily ignored by some Mahima Dharmees. Others disqualify these poems as being composed *before* he became a saint. And again others read them as allegories of his love towards his guru. There are again apocrypha about Bhima Bhoi which regard him as a 'womanizer' in his youth. He is imagined as being fair and muscled, having a strong and hairless body. It is also reported that he enjoyed wearing women's clothing. It appears that this is an interesting field of investigation. However, people are reluctant to talk about this rather unusual aspect of Bhima Bhoi. In fact, if one looks into his poetic composition, one finds a lot of references to sex and physical enjoyment. He never claimed to be an ascetic or to have renounced his status of a householder.<sup>28</sup> On the contrary, there exist a certain number of passages where he openly refuses to adopt a chaste lifestyle.

We see that Bhima Bhoi does not fit into the canonical picture of a saint who lives his life in devotion to god and austerity. This leads to diverse reactions among his followers which can be illustrated by the narratives mentioned above. The first option is to adversely criticize Bhima Bhoi and to reject his immoral attitudes. The Balkaladharis of Joranda clearly express this opinion. The second option is to ignore all accusations and to see Bhima Bhoi as well as his children as a kind of divine incarnations, being above the physical world of sex and gender. Being divine, Bhima Bhoi can emanate children, staying with women yet refraining from touching them.

## CONTESTED HAGIOGRAPHY

It has become clear that most of the stories about Bhima Bhoi have to be understood in the context of Indian hagiographies. His biography makes a lot of references to 'classic' mythological sequences as well as contemporary political discourses. Hagiographic topics such as his divine origin and his devotional lifestyle are mixed with discourses about social emancipation and reform. The controversies mentioned above concerning the life of Bhima Bhoi result from the different perspectives from which he is examined. These controversies culminate in the following question: if and to what extent, Bhima Bhoi was against orthodoxy, tradition, brahmanic hegemony, Vedas, and ritualistic Hinduism?

Further we must examine the people who create and the institutions that promote these stories. Discourses are not created in an empty space but embedded in social interactions. The first institutionalized group to examine is the ascetic order. The documents concerning the juridical debate between the Balkaladharis and Kaupinadharis of Joranda are especially revealing for our investigation.<sup>29</sup> It is not the question of who is superior, nor the struggle concerning the temple management, property, money, influence, nor domination which attracts me, neither do the arguments, the enquiries, replies, and court decisions. What makes this controversy interesting is the fact that Bhima Bhoi is a reference in the ongoing fight of influence among these two groups. There seems to be a different reception of Bhima Bhoi: while the Kaupinadharis claim to follow Bhima Bhoi's books as the main source, as their holy book, the Balkaladharis seem to take Bhima Bhoi as one amongst others. They do not seem to accord him a special position. In an open letter Biswanath Baba, who was one of the main actors in this debate, presents his point of view. Speaking for the Balkaladhari community, he says that the books of Bhima Bhoi are not taken as books laying down regulations or roles of conduct but they are accepted as religious books, and they are read along with others.<sup>30</sup> Bhima Bhoi, having accepted two brahmin ladies, deviated from the principles of Mahima Dharma. According to Satrughna Nath, spokesman of Biswanath Baba, sannyasins from Joranda should not stay in Khaliapali and should not take any food.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, the Kaupinadharis accept Bhima Bhoi's writings as a code and authority.<sup>32</sup> Bhima Bhoi is either considered as the absolute authority, the mouthpiece of Mahima Swami, or as just one writer among others. In the final judgement of the court it is stated that the Balkaladharis are the legitimate owners of the Mahima Gadi in Joranda and that their authority should be respected. They are now officially recognized as the



legitimate representatives of the Mahima Dharma religion. The Kaupinadharis have lost. The argument of Biswanath Baba has been accepted, and the predominant role of Bhima Bhoi as it was projected by the Kaupinadharis is nullified. Biswanath Baba's group not only recognizes other Hindu scriptures such as the *Manusmriti* as equally—or even more—important but also argues that the philosophy of Mahima Dharma is in full accordance with the Vedas, the Puranas, and the Bhagavadgita. According to them Mahima Dharma is nothing else but true Vedanta. Bhima Bhoi's revolutionary and challenging positions are neutralized and annihilated. The particularity of Mahima Dharma due to Bhima Bhoi's extraordinary criticism becomes less visible. In other words, the challenging appeal of the Mahima Dharma movement which led some people to conclude that the Mahima Dharmees are a separate, that is, a non-Hindu sect, is disappearing. Biswanath Baba functions here as a motor of an ongoing saffronization.<sup>33</sup> According to him, it is impossible to consider Mahima Dharma as different from Vedanta and sanatana dharma. Mahima Dharma has become part of the dominant Hindu mainstream.

In this ongoing process of interpretation, adaptation, and reappropriation of Bhima Bhoi, the Mahima Dharmees of the Kardula village represent another contrasting agent. Their *matha* was founded by a certain Satya Narayan Baba. Whilst all members—as well as the founder himself—belong to the Ganda caste, they claim that people from other castes such as brahmins, chasa, and dumal also take *diksha* and join them. One has to notice that in Orissa the Gandas are treated as untouchable. The converts seem to question everything in Mahima Dharma. For example, they worship an image arguing that no one ever condemned idol worship. Interestingly they legitimate their difference by insisting that they alone are the true followers of Bhima Bhoi. According to Satya Narayan's wife, who is still very much alive, her husband was an incarnation of god. She claimed that he continued the mission of Bhima Bhoi when he had left this world. He completed the unfinished work attracting a large number of followers and disciples. In fact, this section of the Mahima Dharmees illuminates clearly the subaltern aspect of the Mahima Dharma. The so-called down trodden communities have adopted the Mahima cult as their specific religion in order to protest against their social and religious exclusion. But the explicit anti-brahmanism represents only one current of the totality of the Mahima Dharma movement, for we have to recall that Joranda is not a subaltern institution but a powerful monastery supported by rich farmers and upper castes.

Bhima Bhoi is not only appropriated and contested within the Mahimite

community. He has become a vehicle of affirming a specific cultural Oriya identity. Bhima Bhoi is promoted as one of the founding fathers of Oriya literature. He is considered to be a national integrator. Through him tribal and Vedic culture became united and harmonized. He was preaching universal love, a universal message among the rich and the poor, among the kings and the Adivasis of the jungle. Many institutions in the name of Bhima Bhoi exist. Let us take only the Bhima Bhoi Samadhi Pitha Trust of Khaliapali (Sonepur) as a significant example.

As a saint Bhima Bhoi is believed to offer solutions to contemporary problems. The hagiographic narratives are orientated to representing an example to follow; the educational aspect is very expressive. Let us quote Sudhakar Das (2000: 6), a Reader in Oriya from Sonepur College who says:

In the present context, age-old problems like casteism, ignorance, and poverty are still persisting, newer and more vicious challenges like communalism, violence against women, especially rape and dowry torture, corruption and degradation of moral values are confronting the people, almost paralyzing the growth of the nation. At such time, the thinking of Bhima Bhoi, the revolutionary, the visionary, philosopher, and poet might provide a solution.

Equally Gorekanath Sahu (1999), lawyer and journalist from Sonepur states:

The application of the great thinker's philosophy can find the elusive solution to the myriad of problems by which the society has been plagued.

Bhima Bhoi is a hero above all creeds and religions; he is no longer a preacher of Mahima Dharma. He becomes a universal saviour, an example of universal humanity. In fact, Bhima Bhoi has become more and more an object of diverse political and religious discourses. Congress politicians have appropriated Bhima Bhoi as the direct precursor of Gandhi and prophet of Indian Independence. Ancharlott Eschmann (1978: 407) quotes a booklet which 'culminates in identifying Bhima Bhoi as fighter for the unification of India under the banner of sanatana dharma. I have to add that Bhima Bhoi also represents the significance of western Oriya culture in a pan-Indian context. He is currently easily integrated in the separatist discourse demanding an independent Koshal Pradesh. More and more intellectuals reclaim Bhima Bhoi as man of the soil demanding that his writings be published in their original language, Sambalpuri. Bhima Bhoi is used as a critic of the coastal hegemony and a forerunner of western Orissa's fight for recognition.

Let me mention another interesting phenomenon. From the scientific point of view it has always been highlighted that the Mahima Dharma is

an autochthonous reform movement which developed independently from Christian influences. This would be the principal characteristic which distinguishes it from other so-called neo-Hindu reform movements such as the Arya Samaj or the Ramakrishna Mission. This statement is partially correct. Bhima Bhoi was not in the position to become influenced by Western missionaries. He did not travel to Western countries; his cultural background was very different from that of Vivekananda. However, we have to be very careful with arguments based on this assumption. Firstly, we should remember that Bhima Bhoi did establish some contact with Christianity. We know that he was accused of being a secret Christian though he refused this vehemently. Secondly, it should be reminded that the discourse of Bhima Bhoi's Indianness is much used by nationalist Hindus. They always argue that the Mahima Dharmees are 'real' Hindus and that they were not influenced by any Christians. They emphasize, on the contrary, that Bhima Bhoi *resisted* the Christians. Being a tribal, he did not convert to Christianity but reformed Hinduism. Doing so, he saved the masses from becoming Christians. In that way Bhima Bhoi is a true nationalist, defending the Hindus against the foreign missionaries. Significant is the anti-Western and anti-Christian tone of this discourse.

Thus far we have seen the nationalistic interpretation of Bhima Bhoi. But there are other voices to be heard. As I have already argued, Bhima Bhoi is a matter of ongoing negotiations between different socio-religious groups. In Sonapur I had an interview with a Christian pastor which culminated in the question of whether Bhima was Christian or not. He, of course, argued that Bhima was Christian, having converted due to some divine visions. But he was a secret Christian. He could not declare it openly because people would torture him. He had already suffered so much when people had tried to kill him. While not particularly esteeming this argumentation, it does reveal some interesting facts. The pastor belonged to the Ganda-Pana caste and heard that I was interested in Bhima Bhoi. By telling me that Bhima Bhoi was Christian he tried to stoke my curiosity. He tried to impress me. It is the dynamics of this communicational situation which I want to stress. In a competition, in a fight for recognition, influence, prestige, and superiority, Bhima Bhoi's reference becomes a valuable argument.

## CONCLUSION

It has become clear that Bhima Bhoi is imagined in many ways: a poet, a freedom fighter, a prophet, a *bhakta*, a *santha*, and even as an

incarnation of god. The question is then how one can analyse the diversity of interpretations. First of all, it has to be admitted that he was without any doubt an extraordinary person and that he must have had a charismatic personality. Bhima Bhoi further seems to defy all attempts at characterization. From the reading of his poetry, one easily imagines his complex and contradictory personality. He definitely was above any kind of sectarian affiliation or dogmatism. He was a poet, a householder, a mystic, and a devotee.

With a rich hagiographic tradition in mind, people started narrating Bhima Bhoi's life. Certain narrators might have been inspired by his complex personality. Most of the stories circulate independently from the historicity of the depicted events or persons. They follow a culturally determined canon of religious topics such as miraculous birth, conversion, healing powers, and sagacity. Supreme human qualities such as altruism or secular virtues such as a sense of social equality, national integration, and patriotism, are the other recurrent topics which can be extracted. Bhima Bhoi is even commemorated as a semi-divine person within an explicit mythological framework. Attempts are made to Hinduize Bhima Bhoi, but they remain ineffective since contesting narratives continue to circulate. In fact, the extraordinary regional and cultural diversity which characterizes Mahima Dharma in Orissa opposes this kind of appropriation.

In other words, Bhima Bhoi is re-actualized in different contexts and is part of diverse religious discourses and political projections. His life is permanently reinvented and canonized by particular persons and institutions. The multiple and contradicting biographies reveal social conflicts as well as different models of sainthood. Ascetic ideals compete with ideas on social reform, religious authorities are contested. I do stress the contradicting dynamics involved in the process of creating Bhima Bhoi's life story since there is no such thing as a normative hagiography, canonized by a certain institution. In the case of Bhima Bhoi we have seen that there are many texts competing with one another, each claiming to be an authority. It is only through a synchronic perspective that variations and contradictions can be seriously taken into account. A diachronic perspective will show which topics dominate and which stories disappear. This is an ongoing process, and no definite account of the life of Bhima Bhoi can be given. New discourses about him will either erase (such as the scientific one which I circulate) or contribute to his sainthood.

## ENDNOTES

1. The present research was funded by the German Research Council (DFG). However, it could not have been done without the help of my many Indian friends and colleagues. I am especially grateful to Kedar Mishra from Sonapur for his assistance and Dr Gourang Charan Dash from Anugul for providing me with numerous documents. The passages of Bhima Bhoi's *Stuticintamani* have been translated into English by Sanjeeb Kumar Nayak.

2. For more detailed information on the theology, history, and organization of Mahima Dharma in Orissa, see the works of Eschmann (1978), Deo (1999), Banerjee (1999 and 2001), Mishra (1998), and Lidia Guzy's contribution in the present volume.

3. See for example the widely circulated edition of Bhima Bhoi's collected works published in 1991 by Karunakara Sahu: *Bhaktakavi Bhima Bhoi Granthavali* (Oriya), Cuttack: Dharmagrantha Store.

4. See for example Basu (1911: 161), Mazumdar (1911: 139) or Sharma (1942: 35).

5. The notion of 'orthodox Hinduism' is problematic since the term Hinduism is itself a construction and a descriptive abstraction designing a very complex and contradictory ensemble of theological concepts, cultural norms, and ritual practices. In the absence of any centralized religious authority, the term of orthodoxy has therefore a quite distinct meaning. It designates generally brahmanic Hinduism.

6. Cf. S. Mahapatra (1983); B. Nepak (1997); S. Nath (1990).

7. Cf. Debendra Dash's (1997) re-edition of articles on Bhima Bhoi published in Oriya newspapers of the time.

8. Hagiography refers to the body of literature describing the lives and veneration of the Christian saints. The literature of hagiography embraces acts of the martyrs (that is, accounts of their trials and deaths); biographies of saintly monks, bishops, princes, or virgins; and accounts of miracles connected with saints' tombs, relics, icons, or statues. As Hawley (1987), Callewaert, Snell (1994), and Mallison (2001) have shown, this concept can be used to study stories of Muslim saints, Buddhist Bodhisattvas, or Hindu poets in a comparative perspective.

9. The New Testament is a famous example of the misreading of religious 'biographies'. For a long time, theologians tried to find out the historical facts about the life of Jesus by eliminating systematically all legendary elements in the Gospels. Contemporary research has abandoned the idea of getting any objective information about Jesus himself and analyses the New Testament as a collection of stories *about* Jesus written in specific communicational contexts. Cf. Wilhelm Egger, *Methodenlehre zum Neuen Testament*, Breisgau, Herder, 1987.

10. Some *bhajans* of Bhima Bhoi are available on audio-cassettes: *Mahima Alekh (Bhimabhoi Bhajan)*, presented by Arabinda Mudul, recorded at J.E. Studios, Cuttack, produced and distributed by Jagannath Electronics, Cuttack;

*Bhimabhoi Bhajan*, presented by Mana Mahapatra, recorded at J.E. Studios Cuttack, produced and distributed by Jagannath Electronics, Cuttack.

11. Bhima Bhoi is believed to have predicted the 'Super Cyclone'. From his *Padmakalpa* he is quoted: 'All of a sudden a cyclone will come and swallow all villages, towns, and countries', cf. *Ghora Kali Yuganta 1999–2010* (Oriya) edited by A.K. Sahu, 1999, Cuttack: Dharmagrantha Store.

12. The couplet reads: '*Prāññikāārata duḥkha aprameta, dekhū dekhū kebā sahu, mo jīvana pache narke pradithāu, jagata uddhāra heu*'. B. Nepak (1998: 42) translates: 'Boundless is the anguish and misery of the living. Who can see it and tolerate? Let my soul be condemned to hell, but let the universe be redeemed.'

13. *Stuticintamani*, 2.15.

14. Op. cit., 21.16–17.

15. Op. cit., 21.7–11.

16. The term *pancashakha* means 'the five friends' and denotes a mystic movement in medieval Orissa of which Achyutananda Das is one of the most important representatives. See C. Das 1951.

17. Interestingly the Mahima Dharmees who originate from the Desi tribe of Koraput, do not have any knowledge about Bhima Bhoi. See the fascinating research undertaken by Lidia Guzy (2001).

18. On behalf of the Ganda-Panas, see the monograph of Nityananda Patnaik and Sarat Chandra Mohanty 1988.

19. According to N.N. Basu (1911: 161), Satrughna Nath (1990: 11), Chittaranjan Das (1951: 160), and Ancharlott Eschmann (1978: 382), Bhima Bhoi was blind from his birth. However, according to Bibhuti Mishra (1998: 64–8), Sitakant Mahapatra (1983: 10–11), and Bhagirathi Nepak (1997: 96), Bhima Bhoi was not blind at all.

20. See *Stuticintamani*, 20.6–7 and 20.13.

21. Op. cit., 92.1.

22. In his *Stuticintamani* 1.12, he says for example: 'Abandoning the worship of gods and goddesses made of clay and stones, I have been meditating on you only with deep sincerity and steadfastness with the hope of getting salvation.'

23. *Census of India*, 1911, Religion, Chapter iv, p. 212.

24. It is told that Lord Jagannath incarnated as Jagannath Das who later became Govinda Das, the founder of the ashram in Balasingha, cf. Biswanath Baba (1991: 41); Sahoo (2001: 73); Eschmann (1978: 382).

25. The transcript of the letter is kept in the Orissa Archive of the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg.

26. In a personal communication Martin Fuchs confirmed parallel observations. According to him, most of the dalits with whom he interacted in Dharavi, the largest slum settlement in Mumbai, seem to disregard unmarried men. Could one conclude that this represents a common characteristic or a cultural pattern among so-called lower or non-brahmin castes?

27. He uses for example the word of *amrita* (mythic nectar of eternal life) to designate the male semen; the female vagina is termed *padma* (lotus).

28. In *Stuticintamani* 63.10 he admits to enjoying the pleasures of this world. Moreover he does not see any harm in it.

29. The *Balkaladharis* put on the bark of the Kumbhi-tree, claiming that their vestment signifies spiritual superiority. According to them, every novice (*tyagi*) first gets a *kaupina* cloth from his guru, and if he is approved, the *balkala*. The *Kaupinadharis* wear loin-cloth of red ochre dyed cloth because according to them Mahima Gosain gave the *balkala* only to a limited number of disciples, that is the sixty-four *siddhas*. In other words, the *Balkaladharis* claim to be on the top of the sacred hierarchy, but the *Kaupinadharis* do not recognize this claim and fight for an equal recognition.

30. Deposition by Abadhut Biswanath Baba before the Commissioner of Endowments, Orissa, Cuttack, 28 March 1961, South Asia Institute, Orissa Archive, MSS 175.

31. See an interview with Anncharlon Eschmann on 30 July 1971. The transcript of the interview is kept in the Orissa Archive of the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg.

32. Cf. 'Shri Mahima Gadi, Joranda', signed C. Mohapatra, Commissioner of Endowments, 4 October 1967, South Asia Institute, Orissa Archive, MSS 175.

33. Satrughna Nath (1990: 99) wrongly translates the term *geru* designing the earthen colour of the ascetic robe, as saffron.

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