

## Santhakabi Bhima Bhoi: The Saint-Poet of Compassion and Social Reform in Odisha

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### Abstract

Santhakabi Bhima Bhoi occupies a unique place in the religious, literary, and socio-cultural history of Odisha. A nineteenth-century poet-saint, philosopher, and social reformer, he emerged as the foremost exponent of the *Mahimā Dharma* movement and became the voice of the marginalized sections of society. Through his devotional poetry and philosophical compositions, Bhima Bhoi propagated the ideals of equality, compassion, universal brotherhood, and spiritual liberation. His works reveal a profound concern for human suffering and a deep commitment to social transformation. The famous prayer, “*Mo jībana pachhe narke paḍithāu, jagata uddhāra heu,*” reflects his selfless desire for the welfare of humanity. His literary contributions enriched Odia literature and strengthened the ethical and spiritual foundations of society. The present article examines the life, philosophy, literary contributions, social vision, and enduring relevance of Santhakabi Bhima Bhoi in the context of Indian intellectual and cultural traditions.

**Keywords:** Bhima Bhoi, *Mahimā Dharma*, Odia Literature, Saint-Poet, Social Reform, Compassion, Equality, Spirituality, Tribal Culture, Odisha.

### Introduction

The nineteenth century witnessed significant religious and social transformations throughout India. During this period, numerous saints, reformers, and spiritual leaders emerged to challenge social inequalities and revive ethical values. Odisha also experienced a remarkable spiritual awakening through the *Mahimā Dharma* movement, which emphasized monotheism, equality, simplicity, and devotion to the formless Absolute. Among the leading figures of this movement, Santhakabi Bhima Bhoi occupies a distinguished position. Born in humble circumstances among the tribal communities of western Odisha, Bhima Bhoi transformed personal suffering into a universal message of compassion and redemption. Although visually impaired and socially marginalized, he became one of the greatest spiritual poets of Odisha. His writings transcend sectarian boundaries and address fundamental human concerns such as suffering, injustice, salvation, and divine grace. Through poetic expressions rich in devotion and

philosophical insight, he sought to create a society based on equality, morality, and spiritual consciousness.

Bhima Bhoi's contributions extend beyond literature and religion. He challenged caste discrimination, advocated social justice, and emphasized the dignity of every human being. His life and works continue to inspire scholars, social reformers, and spiritual seekers. An examination of his literary and philosophical contributions reveals his enduring significance in Indian culture and thought.

### Life and Historical Background of Bhima Bhoi

The exact date of Bhima Bhoi's birth remains uncertain, though most scholars place it around 1850 CE in present-day Odisha. He is generally believed to have been born in the Kandha tribal community in the region of Rairakhol.<sup>1</sup> His early life was marked by poverty, social exclusion, and physical hardship. Tradition maintains that he suffered from visual impairment, which further intensified his experiences of suffering and marginalization.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these challenges, Bhima Bhoi possessed extraordinary spiritual sensitivity. His encounter with the teachings of Mahimā Svāmī, the founder of *Mahimā Dharma*, transformed his life.<sup>3</sup> He became one of the foremost disciples and literary exponents of the movement. Through his devotional songs and philosophical compositions, he communicated the principles of *Mahimā Dharma* to common people across Odisha.

Bhima Bhoi eventually established a spiritual centre at Khaliapali in present-day Subarnapur (Sonepur) district. This centre became an important hub for religious activities and dissemination of *Mahimā* teachings.<sup>4</sup> From there, he composed numerous devotional works that spread throughout Odisha and neighboring regions.

### Bhima Bhoi and Mahimā Dharma

*Mahimā Dharma* emerged during the nineteenth century as a reformist religious movement. It rejected idol worship, ritualism, caste discrimination, and social inequality.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it advocated devotion to Alekha, the indescribable and formless Supreme Reality.

Bhima Bhoi became the principal literary voice of *Mahimā Dharma*. Through his poetic compositions, he interpreted the philosophical principles of the movement in a language accessible to ordinary people.<sup>6</sup> His writings emphasize the transcendence of God, the impermanence of worldly existence, and the necessity of spiritual realization.

According to Bhima Bhoi, true religion lies not in external rituals but in purity of heart and

compassionate action.<sup>7</sup> He consistently criticized religious hypocrisy and advocated sincerity in spiritual practice. His works transformed *Mahimā Dharma* from a localized movement into a broader spiritual and social force.

### Literary Contributions of Bhima Bhoi

Bhima Bhoi's literary achievements represent one of the greatest contributions to Odia literature. His poetry combines spiritual depth, philosophical reflection, and emotional intensity.<sup>8</sup> Among his major works, *Stuti Cintāmaṇi* occupies a central position. This monumental composition contains numerous devotional verses expressing profound spiritual experiences and reflections on human suffering.<sup>9</sup> The text remains one of the most revered works in *Mahimā* literature.

Another important work is *Brahma Nirūpaṇa Gītā*, which discusses the nature of the Supreme Reality and the path toward liberation.<sup>10</sup> Through poetic language, Bhima Bhoi presents complex metaphysical concepts in a form understandable to common people. His *Śruti Niṣedha Gītā* critiques ritualistic practices and emphasizes direct spiritual experience.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, *Nirveda Sādhanā* focuses on detachment from worldly attachments and devotion to the Divine.

The literary style of Bhima Bhoi is characterized by simplicity, musicality, and emotional appeal. His language reflects the speech patterns of ordinary people, enabling his message to reach diverse audiences.<sup>12</sup>

### Philosophy of Compassion and Universal Welfare

The central theme of Bhima Bhoi's philosophy is compassion. His famous prayer:

*“prāṇīnka ārata duḥkha- apramita dekhu dekhu kevā sahu  
mo jībana pachhe narke paḍithāu, jagata uddhāra heu”*,

expresses his willingness to endure suffering for the welfare of humanity.<sup>13</sup>

This prayer represents one of the highest expressions of altruism in Indian spiritual literature. Bhima Bhoi believed that spiritual realization should lead to concern for the suffering of others.<sup>14</sup> Personal salvation was meaningful only when connected with the welfare of society. His philosophy resonates with broader Indian traditions emphasizing compassion, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Bhakti movements.<sup>15</sup> However, Bhima Bhoi articulated these ideals in a uniquely Odia context shaped by tribal culture and *Mahimā Dharma*.

For him, compassion was not merely an emotional response but a spiritual obligation. Every individual was expected to participate in the alleviation of suffering and promotion of justice.<sup>16</sup>

### Social Reform and Critique of Caste Discrimination

One of the most remarkable aspects of Bhima Bhoi's work is his critique of social inequality. Nineteenth-century Odisha was characterized by rigid caste divisions and widespread discrimination.<sup>17</sup> Bhima Bhoi challenged these practices through both his teachings and personal example. As a member of a marginalized tribal community, he understood the realities of social exclusion firsthand.<sup>18</sup> His writings consistently affirm the spiritual equality of all human beings.

According to Bhima Bhoi, distinctions based on caste, birth, or social status have no significance before the Supreme Reality.<sup>19</sup> All individuals possess equal potential for spiritual growth and liberation. His teachings contributed significantly to the democratization of religious life in Odisha. By emphasizing equality and accessibility, he opened spiritual participation to groups traditionally excluded from mainstream religious institutions.<sup>20</sup>

### Spiritual Vision and Concept of Alekha

The concept of *Alekha* forms the theological foundation of Bhima Bhoi's philosophy. *Alekha* refers to the indescribable, formless, eternal, and transcendent Supreme Being.<sup>21</sup> Unlike traditions centered on image worship, *Mahimā Dharma* emphasizes direct devotion to this formless Reality. Bhima Bhoi repeatedly describes *Alekha* as beyond human comprehension and linguistic expression.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, he also portrays the Divine as compassionate and accessible through sincere devotion. Spiritual realization requires inner purification, humility, and detachment from worldly desires.<sup>23</sup> The concept of *Alekha* reflects a synthesis of Upanishadic non-dualism, Bhakti devotion, and indigenous spiritual traditions. Through poetic imagery, Bhima Bhoi communicates profound metaphysical insights while maintaining accessibility for ordinary devotees.<sup>24</sup>

### Human Suffering in Bhima Bhoi's Poetry

Human suffering occupies a central place in Bhima Bhoi's literary vision. His poetry reflects deep awareness of poverty, injustice, disease, and social oppression.<sup>25</sup> Unlike purely metaphysical discussions, his writings remain grounded in concrete human experiences. He portrays suffering not merely as an individual problem but as a collective condition requiring moral and spiritual response.<sup>26</sup>

The emotional power of his poetry derives from personal experience. Having endured hardship throughout his life, Bhima Bhoi speaks with authenticity and empathy.<sup>27</sup> His poetic reflections on suffering encourage both spiritual introspection and social responsibility. The recognition of suffering

becomes the foundation for compassion, ethical action, and collective transformation.<sup>28</sup>

### **Bhima Bhoi and Tribal Cultural Heritage**

Bhima Bhoi's background within the Kandha tribal community significantly influenced his worldview and literary expression.<sup>29</sup> His works preserve elements of indigenous culture while integrating broader philosophical and religious traditions. The simplicity of his language, closeness to nature, and emphasis on communal values reflect tribal cultural influences.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, his writings engage with complex theological and philosophical questions.

His achievements demonstrate the intellectual and spiritual contributions of tribal communities to Indian civilization. Bhima Bhoi challenged prevailing assumptions regarding cultural hierarchy and established the legitimacy of marginalized voices within mainstream literary discourse.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, he is celebrated not only as a religious reformer but also as a representative of tribal cultural identity and creativity.<sup>32</sup>

### **Relevance of Bhima Bhoi in Contemporary Society**

The teachings of Bhima Bhoi remain highly relevant in the modern world. Contemporary societies continue to face challenges such as social inequality, religious intolerance, environmental degradation, and moral decline.<sup>33</sup> His emphasis on compassion provides an ethical framework for addressing these issues. The ideal of universal welfare encourages collective responsibility and social solidarity.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, his rejection of caste discrimination and social exclusion resonates strongly with contemporary efforts to promote equality and human rights.<sup>35</sup> Bhima Bhoi's vision of spiritual unity also offers valuable insights for interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence. His teachings transcend sectarian boundaries and affirm the common dignity of all human beings.<sup>36</sup> In an era characterized by materialism and individualism, his message of selflessness and moral commitment remains deeply inspiring.

### **Conclusion**

Santhakabi Bhima Bhoi stands among the most significant spiritual and literary figures of nineteenth-century India. Through his life and works, he transformed personal suffering into a universal message of compassion, equality, and spiritual liberation. As the principal poet of *Mahimā Dharma*, he articulated a vision of religion grounded in sincerity, morality, and concern for humanity.

His literary contributions enriched Odia literature and provided a powerful medium for communicating philosophical and ethical ideals. His critique of caste discrimination, advocacy of social justice, and emphasis on universal welfare established him as a pioneering social reformer. The concept of

*Alekha* and the philosophy of compassion continue to inspire spiritual seekers and scholars alike.

Bhima Bhoi's enduring relevance lies in his unwavering commitment to human dignity and collective well-being. His famous prayer for the salvation of the world remains a timeless expression of selfless love and moral responsibility. Consequently, Santakabi Bhima Bhoi occupies a permanent place in the cultural, literary, and spiritual heritage of India.

### Footnotes

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4. Dash, Harekrushna, *Khaliapali Mahimā Tradition*, Sambalpur: Mahima Publications, 2005, p. 18.
5. Eschmann, Anncharlott, *The Cult of Jagannath and Regional Tradition of Orissa*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1986, p. 289.
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12. Mohapatra, Sitakanta, op. cit., p. 122.
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30. Mohapatra, Sitakanta, op. cit., p. 130.
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32. Pradhan, S.C., op. cit., p. 95.
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34. Ibid., p. 150.
35. Mohanty, Jatindra Kumar, op. cit., p. 62.
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