Myths and legends surround Bhima Bhoi’s early life like that of his mentor, Mahima Swamy. A lot of controversy is there regarding his place of birth. Scholars assign from Paiksara, Bolangir district to Kankanapada, Jatasingha and Redhakhol in Sambalpur district and even Joranda in Denkanal district, as his place of birth. ¹ Also, scholars have not yet arrived on the exact year of his birth that is between 1949 and 1869. But there is no controversy regarding his year of death, i.e., he died in 1895 at Khaliapali in Bolangir. There are many legends regarding his birth but we need not to go into the details. But one aspect that whether he was blind is interesting?

N. N. Vasu, in his work says Bhima Bhoi was blind by birth². Artaballav Mohanty in his introduction to Stuti Chintamani relying on medieval literature argues that, he was undoubtedly blind by birth³. B.C Mazumdar and Binayak Mishra speculate that, he lost his eyesight later⁴. N.K. Sahu and M. Mansingh opine that, he lost his eyesight due to small pox⁵. Chittaranjan Das⁶ speculates that, due to his radical stand on caste system the upper caste people of his village threw him in a well where he lost his eyesight. Amongst the followers of Mahima Dahrma also this controversy persists. Biswanath Baba believes that, he was blind by birth whereas Sriya Devi, the adopted daughter of Bhima Bhoi strongly claims that, he was not. Kunja Bihari Baba, a balkala dhari sannyasi, Late Matha, Joranda also believes in the latter. (Author interviewed Kunja Bihari Baba in 1994 on Magha Purnima at Joranda.) Interestingly, malikas of earlier period predicted the coming of Mahima Swamy and Bhima Bhoi as incarnations in the Kali Yuga. Achutananda⁷ (16th century) predicted, “Nitya Radha would take male form in Kaliyuga as Bhim Bhoi”. Sridhar Das⁸ wrote “Radha would take male incarnation at Redhakhol in a Kandha family. He would be blind by birth”.

These compositions known as malikas began in the 16th century and till now are very popular in Odisha. In this literature, the writer uses apocalyptic vision to foresee the end of Kali Yuga so it is vulnerable to interpolations. These compositions need close scrutiny and analysis. In our opinion, uncritical acceptance of these compositions had led to the controversy. Scholars like Bhagirathi Nepak and J. K. Meher have sought to analyze the internal evidence in Bhima Bhoi’s writings and opine that, Bhoi was not blind⁹. They quote some of the compositions of Bhima Bhoi to prove their point.

According to them in the face of information from his own writings, it would be wrong to assume on the basis of malikas and other unauthentic sources that Bhima Bhoi was blind. Further they say that in his autobiographical work Stuti Chintamani¹⁰ he has so many references of his life, miseries, sufferings, humiliation and other personal references. But nowhere had he mentioned about
his blindness. Sitakanta Mohapatra who reviewed life and writings of Bhima Bhoi in Makers of Indian Literature Series, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi writes, “it would be more reasonable to assume that Bhima Bhoi was not blind.”\textsuperscript{11} But Bhoi’s contemporary reports submitted by the Commissioners of Chhatisgarh and Odisha recorded Bhima Bhoi as born-blind but endowed with natural talents of superior order\textsuperscript{12}.

II

From the hagiographies of Mahima Swamy and Bhima Bhoi we find that both of them had uncommon birth. One is \textit{ayonisambhuta} (not from his mother’s womb); the latter was found by his foster parent. Mahima Swamy was considered \textit{sakara} form of \textit{Alekh param–brahman} and Bhoi as reincarnation of Radha. Former’s early life is associated with holy places of India and Odisha, a \textit{sadhu} taking care of the needy, diseased and improving the holy place of Kapilas, endowed with very super-human power. Bhima Bhoi was tribal cowherd boy, a blind illiterate. God transformed him into a poet and assigned the duty to propagate Mahima Dharma. Mahima Swamy, after twenty-four years of penance became a wandering ascetic and remained so till his death. Bhima Bhoi, an ascetic became a householder with five wives. He had one son and one daughter. Both of them predicted their death beforehand and sat on the \textit{Samadhi} on the due date. Swamy built \textit{tungis}, received immense wealth but later he burnt them all. He was not attached to property. He did not recognize any body to inherit. But in case of any crisis among his followers it is believed that he communicated through \textit{sunnya bani}. Bhima Bhoi selected one of his wives as his successor. Perhaps, there were attempts to overcome obscure and low origin of the propagators respectively. Hagiography played an important role. Perhaps, it helped to overcome their shortcomings. A \textit{sadhu} and a tribal with little or no access to sacred text and almost a non-entity to formal education could claim devotional equality if not superiority over the orthodox ruling classes; at last in the eyes of their followers.

In Odishan tradition we came across instances of \textit{sadhus} or mystics claiming yogic power and the \textit{Pancha-sakha} with their \textit{bhakti-marga} counterpoising their powers of seeing the divine or Adi Jagannath against Brahmanic claim to textual knowledge. Bhima Bhoi is one step forward in this matter. He claims the visual experience of the divine everyday. His God is both \textit{Saguna} and \textit{Nirguna}. He resides on all human body irrespective of caste and gender.

The nature of \textit{bhakta} is in itself pure and therefore nothing can pollute him. Bhoi, being \textit{adesia Kandha} and a cowherd boy, was familiar with the sweat and pain of toil. In his compositions he expresses his anguish, injustice, poverty, inequality, exploitation and hopes that all this would come to an end with the victory of Mahima Swami and the subsequent establishment of Mahima Empire. Therefore, he claims the creator is amongst the people in \textit{Sakara} form, which is superior to textual knowledge and even spiritual \textit{darshan}. \textit{Param Brahma} is available at the doorstep, along with the guardian deity of Odisha, Jagannath.
They are available for every ordinary sufferer in this world. Perhaps, this was to valorize the life of the adivasi peasants; in this we also infer that, physically seeing and meeting are held to be superior to hearing and reading. So, physically having Mahima Swamy amidst them and seeing him from a close quarter has been held as the highest spiritual experience.

The adivasi peasants, with oral tradition could claim devotional equality if not superiority over the orthodox ruling classes. The latter almost monopolized not only property but also the sastras and temples considered to be the path of salvation. Meting and listening from a close quarter with Mahima Swamy generated straight, gratifying results like the day to day works of peasants, artisans and tribal people. In Bhima Bhoi we see a step forward than that of the Pancha-sakha of the medieval Odisha. Nineteenth century was the prime time for economic exploitation by the garjat rajas and zamidars of Odisha. They imposed taxes on whatever was susceptible to taxation. They constructed raja uasa or palaces and temples at the expenses of the common men. To make the ruler’s act of taxing rightful an aura was created around the ruler as divine representative on earth. They needed extra revenue to satisfy the demands of the officials, administrators of the estates. Patronage of tantric pithas and shrines of tribal deities in the outskirts of the new capitals of the rulers were no longer suitable to legitimize the elevated position of the new garjat chiefs. Rajas as kshyatriya kings in the Brahmanic model needed temples at the capital town of the estates, in front or even inside the palace. This served the religious as well as political purpose. It also had social impact. Communities were assigned various services to perform in these temples. Big temples may be of the local deity or of Jagannath with landed property and their daily rituals, in a way, were to legitimize the new status of the garjat rajas as the divine representative on earth called raja-mahaprabhu. Against this we come across adivasi peasant uprising in 19th century Odisha. It was against raja-sarkar-thekedar nexus. The rebels’ main targets were land alienation, new taxation, thekedars, and exploiters of forced labors. Therefore, legitimization of their position was crucial for the rulers to counter the rebels.

Rulers of Odisha utilized the ideology of raja-mahaprabhu, thakur-raj based on the principle of loyalty and allegiance. The power of the ruler, obtained through loyalty to a deity, was ideologically designed as a manifestation of deity on earth. The raja was deputy of the deity on earth as well as the Lord of the land (Kingdom), and the subjects subservient to them. Bhima Bhoi in his writings counters the claims of these rulers. Trapping from the Odishan ruler’s concept of political authority Bhima Bhoi depicts Mahima Swamy as living and loving Lord who is personally looking everybody and attending to even the neglected one. Therefore, Bhoi asked Mahima followers to surrender everything to Mahima Swamy instead of rajas or the rulers. In this, he countered the claim of the rulers and challenged the authority of the temporal Kings. He questioned the authority of the king to impose restrictions. According to him, the land and country is the creation of God and the Mahima followers roam there by the grace of God and not by the mercy of the king.
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