

RELIGION OF REBELLION, VOICES FROM EASTERN INDIA: HINDUISM, CASTE AND RESISTANCE

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The ideological landscape of Hinduism and subsequently Hinduistic nationalism has always been characterized by a penchant for majoritarianism. This has essentially resulted in the formulation of an expansionist principle that functioned through the device of co-option and therefore silenced all categories of dissent. It accorded legitimization to itself through the rhetoric of universality, and further asphyxiated protesting voices with the lure of inclusivity and belongingness. Several proponents from its own fold attempted to launch virulent ritualistic *suddhi* movements from time to time to keep its flock together which would then allow it to remain as a substantive reality that could negotiate with the Indian sub-continental history on its own terms.

The repeated attempts of the Hinduistic forces to initiate and perpetuate its image as a pluralistic behemoth however could not obliterate its history littered with instances whereby systematic machinations were devised to ensure a monolithic religious/national scheme. The dissentious reading of the sub continental history also undermines the potency of the myriad claims on the part of the *Sanatana* Hindus who often glorify their faith as the epitome of a harmonious and tolerant worldview. Infact even a cursory reading of the history of origin and evolution of Hinduism in India would make it clear for anyone thus interested that the Hindu juggernaut maintained its momentum by virtue of a divisive ethos neatly cloaked under the benign facet of oneness and tolerance. A religion that proudly and repeatedly proclaimed as its essence the discriminatory practice of *varna* at several points of history strangely succeeded in keeping the centrifugal splinters under check precisely through the strict implementation of divisiveness in the form of casteist practices. The tentacles of Hindu imperialism spread at an exponential pace as its strategy of graded inequality got itself entrenched in the communal psyche and perpetuated victimization through hegemonic zeal.

The purpose of this paper is to attempt a relook at the imperialistic and colonizing tendencies of Hinduism and also to detect the fissures through which the 'systemic silence' embedded in the discourse of the religion can be interrogated to expose the rebellious potential that threatened to unravel the religious authority time and time again. The advantage of hindsight however shows to us the tragic irony of these once revolutionary voices falling silent in the course of time by allowing themselves to be seduced by the mainstream Hinduism, yet the paper functions on the hope that such voices are like unstoppable forces of change the advent of which could only be

halted temporarily and that such forces would metamorphose in the near future and redeem their rebellious zeal.

Though there has been several such forces that attempted to infuse elements of change in the Indian Hindu society since ages and in different corners of the land, yet this paper would only attempt to look at two major religious movements from the eastern part of India due to spatial constraints that is associated with the prospect of writing an essay. The intention is to apply a socio-historical reading to the *Motua* movement in erstwhile east Bengal and *Mahimadharm* (and subsequently its bifurcation into *satyamahima dharma* under the spiritual stewardship of the saint poet BhimaBhoi) in Orissa and trace their trajectory in post-independence India as narratives of protest aimed at ending several malpractices that plagued the Hindu Indian society. The intention is to bring into focus the metamorphosis undergone by both the eminent movements once it steered away from their initial ‘reformist’ zeal.

In fact it would only be apt to point out that the use of the term ‘reformist’ in the earlier sentence is deliberate on the part of this essayist. The primary proposition that is intended and would be argued in the course of the essay is that both the movements though started as rebellious gestures and with much righteous anger against the Brahminical appropriation of Hinduism and subsequent marginalization of the ‘lower’ castes, gradually lost themselves in the labyrinth of ritualism and ironically replicated the very same practices that they started against in the first place.

Several causes for such a turn-around could be traced, one of the primary being the need on the part of the new faiths to incorporate themselves with the socio-economic and political changes brought about by post-colonial modernist ethos. Another significant reason could be their inability to withstand the parasitical impulse of the dominant Hindu religion and its appropriating mechanisms. Yet protests have been happening and perhaps the first such protest that happened in the sub-continent was headed by the disillusioned prince Siddhartha who left the luxuries of a cocooned life to search for the panacea for life’s miseries. Though according to legends Gautama was perturbed by death and miseries, nevertheless post self-emancipation he laid equal emphasis in the need to rid the Indian society of several artificial inequalities first before leading them on the path to a more spiritual freedom in the form of *nirvana*. His attempts to rectify the wrongs perpetuated within the Hindu fold had a dominant sociological impetus rather than merely religious. Hence Buddha has been hailed as the first social reformer with immense influence and substantial following and ironically has been later incorporated as an *avatar* by the same Brahmanized Hindus against whom Buddha gave his clarion call and threatened to unravel their dominance. Readers may wonder why I am dwelling on a two thousand years old saint and his contribution when in the initial parts of this essay I have claimed to talk about the *Motua and Mahima* cults. The purpose of starting the discussion with a reference to Gautama Buddha is twofold in this case. *Firstly*, I would like to claim that every rebellious religion/cult that succeeded Buddhism followed their *core* sociological promises. *Secondly*, much like Buddhism, majority of the followers of these cults/religions left the Hindu fold to join them due to the promise of egalitarianism based on the desire to transcend the caste barriers.

Therefore the reference to Buddhism provides an apt context of rebellion and points at the desire to unleash forces of social engineering geared towards creating an equal and democratic space that would nurture the true potential of each individual in the society. Such a promise of a sprightly social revolution, premised upon spirituality and which had the incisive edge of rationalism to cut through the beleaguered social order of the day was the fundamental

driving force for both the *Matuas* and the *Mahimadharmis*. The institution of caste, the basic unit of the Hindu social structure and their larger worldview was the first target of criticism for these new forces. They reserved their most vitriolic anger against the rampant *brahmanization* that plagued the *sanatana* Hindu promise and also raised their collective voice against the ritualization that seeped in Hinduism primarily to fatten the belly of the Brahmins.

The denigrating practice of *untouchability* that was nurtured like a cancerous vermin acted as the basic trigger for the protesting religions/cults. It was to escape from such casteist persecution and formulate an independent, dignified model of existence that the erstwhile *chandals* of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) led by the Thakurs of Orakandi raised the banner of the Motua religion. The desire to escape the trauma of a fixed dehumanizing identity that the *chandals* had to suffer through ages in the traditional Hindu social iconography and experiential topography made them steel their resolve to relinquish their Hindu identity. Traditionally the *chandals* had numerically been the second largest community in that part of the sub-continent and were associated with no particular profession. Sumit Sarkar pointed this out in his essay:

“Brahmanas, Vaidyas, and Kayasthas ...who did not deserve the title of ‘bhadrak’(used)...the derogatory epithet ‘chandal’ to refer to people of diverse occupations and endogamous groups but a roughly similar, despised social position.”

Owing to their numerical superiority and economic prowess the *chandals* from eastern part of Bengal have always been progressive in their outlook and realized that there was no hope for dignity for them if they continued to remain within the Hindu fold. Not only this, they decoded the ethos of colonial modernity and therefore realized the value of western education much in advance. Therefore an astute reading of contemporary socio-political scenario and a willingness to achieve social respectability allowed them to imagine a reality outside the exploitative Hindu social structure. Their keen historical-political consciousness made them voluntary resisters to Brahminical dominance and not only this they even aspired to change their denigrating nomenclature accorded by Brahminized historiography. They recognized the possibility to ‘deconstruct’ their identity in a comparatively favourable atmosphere where the erstwhile Brahminical political system was substituted by the colonial administration. The willingness of the newly emerging colonial power to *re-name* and thereby alter the course of history gave the *chandals* a much sought after opportunity to revise their present by discontinuing their past. Hence, during the census of 1901 they made their desire to leave the fold of Hinduism evident to the Census commissioner and demanded that they be known as *namashudras* thereon.

However one ought to mention at this juncture that this was not merely an attempt on the part of the *chandals* to assume a cosmetic nomenclature but a statement of intent to chart out a new path of development. This penchant for individuality and dignity was bolstered by the initiation of the quasi-religious cult of the *Matua dharma* that gained immense clout within a short span of its inception in the rural hinterland of east Bengal. Initially under the stewardship of Harichand Thakur and later under the aegis of his energetic progeny Guruchand Thakur, the Motua cult captured the imagination of millions. Their emphasis on formulating an action oriented spirituality rather than a birth determined schemata allowed them to carve out a distinct space of influence in the Bengali communal psyche. The mantra of *haatekaam, mukheynaam* made it evident that the new order valued a harmonious amalgamation of materialistic and spiritual aspirations of its followers rather than a ritualistic mystic bond to victimize the hapless lower caste populace. The *matuas* with their initial aversion towards idolatry, rituals, casteism

and its propensity for simplifying the spiritual complexities guided a large section of the Bengali society which was operating within a pre-dominantly agrarian set-up. The Thakurbari of Orakandi provided solace and succour to the seeking multitude and the practice of oral songs sung at community centres every evening strengthened the bond among the lower castes and transformed them into a formidable economic and political force who could no longer be ignored within the ambit of social relationships. Their insistence on being separate from the *varna* Hindus allowed them a potent distinctness and allowed the new faith to spread its branches as a novel system.

However with the gradual change in the economic scenario and the rapid urbanizing impulse that accompanied it subsequently in the later colonial era threatened the dynamics of the *motua* cult and triggered an existential dilemma for it. Making the dilemma worse was the insistence on rituals that slowly took roots in the course of time and threatened to unravel the faith from within. The religious texts of the *motuas* now became mere books of myths, legends and claims of mythic antecedence was disconnected from the new realities whereby the erstwhile *namashudras* from pre dominantly rural Bengal were struggling in the alien and alienating urban culture. Even the sectarianism that raised its head after the death of Guruchand Thakur further weakened the movement along with their later insistence on perpetuating a personality cult. This substitution of its egalitarian values with rampant ritualization that veered towards replicating the same Hindu rituals that they abhorred initially, further weakened the movement.

Starting with a reformist agenda, the *matuas* got stuck in the quagmire of superstitions and practices thereby losing their individuality and with the dominant caste society being already in arms against its existence it did not take much time to obliterate the cult. Deliberate obfuscation of historical facts by the Brahmanized Hindus and the curious forces of history that took colossal strides towards urbanization and Hindu nationalization pushed the *motua* cult towards the brink of oblivion. By the early parts of the 19th century the *motuas* lost their significance and importance which they once enjoyed as a potent rival to the Hindu *juggernaut*.

Whereby the *motuas* started as a distinctly non Hindu cult, Mahima Dharma founded by Mukund Das or Mahima Gosai and popularized by the mystic saint poet Bhima Bhoi and Biswanath Baba had no qualms right from their very inception to position itself as a reformative phenomenon within the Hindu super structure. Right from the very beginning they consciously positioned themselves as a constituent of the long line of *Bhakti* proponents through their insistence on personal communication with the omniscient, abhorrence of idolatry and transcendence of caste barriers. In terms of spiritual iconography they propagated the *alekh* as the ultimate reality. However it should be made clear at this point that though simplistic claims have often been made even by scholars that Mahima Dharma borrowed the Buddhist concept of *sunya* and therefore was a replica of the Buddhist spiritual movement. It should be noted that for the mahima dharmis *sunya* corresponds to the Upanishadic *negative theology* rather than the Buddhist conceptualization of *sunya* as the imperceptible that accords great happiness on being contemplated upon. In fact a close inspection of the poems of Bhima Bhoi, the Kondh mystic from the Mahima fold makes it amply clear that the Mahima dharmis inherited the idea of *Purusa* as the personal God akin to the *cosmic man* of whom the Vedas has spoken about in length. Bettina Baumer and Johannes Beltz has pointed this out in the introduction to the book edited by them, 'Bhima Bhoi: Verses from the Void, Mystic Poetry of an Oriya Saint'. I quote:

“He has not only inherited the concept of Purusa as the personal God, but also his Vedic associations as the Cosmic Man in whose body the entire universe is contained, or from whose limbs it was created. It is not just a

theo-cosmology, but a mystical perception of the Supreme Being that is condensed in the image of the Cosmic Purusha:
His head is the dense Void, his belly the earth,
And the underworld his feet. From the pores of his skin
Emerge clusters and clusters of worlds,
And the tallest mountain rise and set.

The purpose of the quote was to highlight the deep entrenchment of the core of the Mahima spiritual philosophy within the sacrosanct sanctum of the Hindu epistemology. Also significant is Mahima Dharma's proximity to earlier Oriya literary traditions which were unapologetically Hinduistic in their final outlook. The Pancasakha and the medieval Bhakti poets from Orissa coaxed eloquent about similar themes, though the redeeming and original factor in the Mahima epistemological tracts primarily penned by Bhima Bhoi is the deep personal human experiential touch which partially obfuscates the fact that there is a generous use of Sanskritized Oriya language which otherwise is the domain of Brahminical Hinduism against which the Mahima followers vowed to function.

However it would be apt to mention that though one normally views Mahima Dharma as a monolithic faith there exist internal differences within it. In fact after the death of the founder Mahima Gosai, the faith witnessed a bifurcation whereby the radical reformist section walked away from the parent fold under the leadership of Bhima Bhoi who had more egalitarian and socialist outlook. The remaining section was known as the *Balkadharis* under the guidance of Biswanath Baba restricted themselves within the Hindu orthodox fold. Baumer and Beltz notes:

“While systematically comparing two groups, one discovers several differences of philosophy, theology and institutional and social order... In fact, Biswanath Baba, who dominated the affairs of the ascetics of Joranda from the late 1920s to the early 1990s attempted to prove, again and again, that Mahima Dharma is in accordance with the Hindu ‘orthodoxy’, i.e. the tradition of the scriptures... The dharma Viswanath Baba popularized was radically different from what Bhima Bhoi thought, since the former insisted that the Vedas, the Bhagavadgita, the Puranas and Vedanta are not at all different from Mahima Dharma, but similar in their approach.”

(P 39, introduction)

It would also be significant to mention that the legends about the birth of Mahima Gosai and Bhima Bhoi follows the familiar trajectory of mythification which is premised on the idea of a miraculous birth, foster parents, auspicious signs and portents, heavenly qualities etc. This can be seen as deliberate attempt to integrate the saints of the dharma within the great pantheon of Hindu avatars. Also the emphasis on the initiation-rights that can be presided over by an able *Guru* alone is again a straight reference to its overwhelmingly Hindu ethos. In fact scholars like Biswamoy Pati argues at several places that Mahima dharma was in essence a Hindu reformist cult that aimed at integrating the rebelling splinter groups within the homogenous Hindu fold and expand it further by bringing into it the substantial population of the tribal who populated vast tracts of land in Orissa. Pati in his essay, ‘Legitimacy, Power and Subversion: Colonial Orissa, c. 1800-1940’ argues that such cults were deliberately formulated and helped by the overwhelmingly Hindu landed aristocracy to legitimise their own power. Though Pati also mentions how such cults with their emphasis on *Alekha* creates a timeless and formless component of reality and in the process de-historicizes Hindu practices and challenges the Hindu conceptualization of the ‘Supreme’. Scholar like Pati believes this process as a constituent of

various other subversive de-legitimization exercises undertaken by the subaltern populace at various moments in History.

Apart from this the simplified marriage rituals propagated by the Mahima dharmis, community feasts organized by them and the emphasis on the oral tradition can be seen as the rebellious quotient that characterized the cult. The popularization of similar counter –rituals and the emphasis on keeping the origin of their founder MahimaGosai deliberately under wraps, according to Pati makes them conscious dissenters. Thus Mahima Gosai is made to transcend the temporal and chronological restrictive structures and provides him with a supreme timelessness and in effect allows him to associate himself with the category of ‘Adi’ and ‘sanatana’ that the Hindus claimed.

This when read in tandem with the similar Motua insistence on rewriting history by delinking themselves from the past seems to be a common strategy of new rebellious institutions undertaken by them to accord a certain degree of potent distinctiveness on themselves. It can be read as a strategy to ensure that the newly initiated forget their *varna* past and reclaim a dignified status in the society.

Thus we finally arrive at the primary problematic regarding the status of such religious movements as Motua Dharma in Bengal and Mahima Dharma in Orissa as subaltern voices of protest. However this essayist has certain reservations about branding these voices of protest as ‘subaltern’, as it presupposes a hierarchy between mainstream and the ‘other’. The sense of *otherization* that results from such a formulation creates an illusion of peaceful homogeneity as a ‘normal’ occurrence. Ironically a valorisation of the ‘other’ creates impediments in our understanding of the Indian society as traditionally pluralistic and multi-faceted. Instead it seems to play into the hands of the vocal Hindu nationalists who are forever interested in portraying dissenting voices as mere ‘aberrations’ thereby perpetuating the myth of Hindu Dharma as *sanatana* and ever tolerant. The emphasis on the *subalternization* of dissenting voices creates a situation whereby the dynamism of the society is ignored in favour of a static conceptualization of the social, anthropological reality.

Hence rather than looking at these movements as subaltern voices of protest or even Hindu reformist movements backed by powerful sections of the Hindu society to co-opt dissentious voices ,I would prefer to look at them during their moments of initiation when a distrust about dominant religious discourse led them to arm themselves independently with alternative philosophies. These movements should be seen within the larger historical context as fulfilling their goals of ensuring a pluralistic polity unwilling to remain passive observers. Such movements might not have been able to sustain their revolutionary fervour for long and dissolved themselves within the large Hinduistic narrative of dominance through replication, yet it prepared the populace for future struggles. Movements like the Mahima Dharma in Orissa and Motua Dharma in erstwhile east Bengal succeeded in creating a discourse of rebellion and a belief that alternative voices always found an expression in the course of Indian social history and this is the belief that later helped luminescent visionaries like Baba Saheb Ambedkar to orchestrate a social tsunami in the 21st century and lead India towards the path of ‘inclusive’ progress.

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