



SOCIAL REFORMATIONS IN THE WRITINGS OF EMERSON AND BHIMA BHOI

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We are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not pinched in a corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but redeemers, and benefactors, pious aspirants to be noble clay plastic under the Almighty effort, let us advance on Chaos and the Dark. (*Major Prose* 128)

Abstract

Emerson and Bhima Bhoi both believed in bringing about a change and revolution to the existing darkness in the nineteenth century American and Oriya society. They were not the persons who would flee from the chaos but were redeemers who marched forward to fight and rebel against the wrongs. Both of them were a source of hope and unbounded aspirations for the oppressed and wanted to construct a society that was conducive to the existence of the common man. Bhima and Emerson wanted the common man to understand the richness of inner self and to introspect on their lives. They believed that self-questioning is important for a man to understand his daily struggles of life. People suffered in all the ages because they distanced themselves from their inner-self and the inner power that they had within themselves to fight against the atrocities. Emerson and Bhima Bhoi recognised the richness of their inner life through Transcendentalism and Mahima Dharma respectively and became catalysts to bring about reformation in the society from its grassroots.

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Just as transcendentalism arose as a protest against the Unitarian Church, the general state of intellectualism and spirituality in nineteenth century America, Mahima Dharma arose as a reaction against casteism, idolatry and belief in superstitions in nineteenth century Orissa. Both of them were pioneers of the movement, extremely influential and were criticised for their views. Emerson's transcendentalism bears close resemblance to Indian philosophy, the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita. In many of his essays, Emerson quotes Indian sayings and earnestly respects the 'karma theory' especially in his essay

“Self –Reliance”. Further, his idea of sin and suffering, evil, fate and freedom are inspired by Indian tradition. Frederic Carpenter writes:

His reading of Indian literature forms one of the most chapters in the story of his literary development; for not only did he owe his poems “Brahma” and “Hamatreya” entirely to Hindu works, but large parts of his essays on “Plato”, “Fate”, “Illusions” and “Immortality” are based on Hindu thought. (104)

Emerson admired the Vedantic literature as it advocated a life in union with the laws of nature. His tremendous love for nature has been established in his various poetry and writings. He believed that nature was God’s world with its contribution of peace, spiritual bliss and reverent faith. Emerson always considered himself as a naturalist. He writes:

The universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever as you glance along this bewildering series of animated forms - the hazy butterflies, the carved shells, the birds, beasts, fishes, insects, snakes and the upheaving principle of life everywhere incipient, in the very rock aging organised forms . . . I will be a naturalist. (*Historical Guide* 22)

Emerson’s growing awareness that man is a spiritual being and that he can discover his true nature not through orthodox beliefs but through intuitive experiences made him resign from his position as a minister. Emerson was spiritually inclined towards the Hindu philosophy. After reading William Jones’s “A Hymn to Narayana”, he wrote back to his aunt Mary Moody Emerson on June 10, 1822:

I am curious to read your Hindu mythologies. One is apt to lament over indolence and ignorance, when we read some of those sanguine students of the Eastern antiquities, who seem to think that all the books of knowledge, and all the wisdom of Europe twice told, lie hidden in the treasure of the Brahmins. (Versluis 53)

Just as Emerson believed that the nature of Ultimate Reality or ‘Para Brahman’ cannot be comprehended by a limited and finite mind and to arrive at the Ultimate Reality one must deny whatever is known to the mind, Mahima Dharma similarly holds the view that ‘Param Brahman’ is formless and omnipresent and that God has no features or attributes. It believed that the ultimate reality is one, non-dual, formless and shapeless. *Alekha* can be comprehended through negative epithets like *alekha* (indescribable), *nirguna* (without attributes), *nirakara* (formless), *anadi* (eternal), *niranjana* (pure) and *mahima* (glory).

Ultimately Sunya came to be treated as the attribute of God who can be attained through devotion. This God in fact was supposed to have the twin attributes of 'being nowhere' and 'being everywhere'. Emerson too questioned the existence of God in a personal form when he writes: "is not man in our day described by the very attributes which once he gave to our God? Is not the sea his minister; the clouds his chariot; the flame his wheels; and the winds his wings?" (Neufeldt 46). Emerson and Bhima Bhoi were criticised, denigrated and attacked by his contemporary fellowmen for their views on religion.

In the works of Bhima Bhoi, one can find elements of other religious traditions that flourished in Orissa namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, tantraism, mysticism and bhakti, and similarly, Emerson's body of works contains elements of pantheism, monism, mysticism, karma or rebirth and maya. Emerson was spiritually inclined towards the Vedantic philosophy and his poem "Brahma" is a faithful representation of the basic idea stressed in the Bhagawad Gita about the immortality of the soul. The entire poem is written in appreciation of Brahma who is the centre of this universe. Brahma is timeless, immortal and permanent who cannot be destroyed. He is omnipresent. The human soul is created by Brahma and the poem states that even though a person is killed physically, his soul remains immortal. The soul, being immortal, does not die with the death of an individual rather it passes from one individual to another and is eternal. Similarly, Bhima Bhoi's Alekha is formless, omnipresent and omniscient who has created this world out of his mahima (glory). The Absolute is beyond attributes, is indescribable and does not require priests, temples or pilgrimages to worship him and one can attain the Absolute individually through prayer and worship. He is all-powerful and all-pervading whose karuna or mercy and compassion must be sought. Emerson and Bhima believed in an impersonal God who has no form or shape: "the things that are seen are temporal, the things that are unseen are eternal" (Joshi 90). Bhima too discredited the temples and place of worship and Emerson believed that the church services are not essential as these are mere human institutions where God cannot be realized. "The prayers and even the dogmas of our church," Emerson wrote, "are like the Zodiac of Deuderah and this astronomical monuments of the Hindoos, wholly insulated from anything now extant in the life and business of people" (Sacks 38). He was discontented with the limitations of the Church worship. When a man renounces truth and finds ways to escape he is dead and no church nor any dogma can save him. Nature has bestowed each individual

with infinite energy and light, and it is man himself who can bring about reformation in himself and in the society.

Emerson believed in a steady means of improvement and change. As he saw God as a moral and spiritual force in every human being, he believed that man has divinity within him and that any change and reform should come from within and not any external structures. No reformer has ever restored in man total peace and contentment and so far neither revolution nor reformation has wiped the tears of man. Hence it is man himself who need to trust his own infinite capabilities and bring about change. Any revolution that brings about momentary relief cannot be called a reformatory one. Man has to reform himself first because Emerson throughout his life was suspicious of the reformers. His belief was that lasting progress can arise only from the reform of the individual himself and men helping other men. He wrote:

I wish to see America not like the old powers of the earth, grasping, exclusive and narrow, but a benefactor such as no country ever was, hospitable to all nations, legislating for all nationalities. Nations were made to help each other as much as families were; and all advancement is by ideas, and not by brute force or mechanic force. (Porte and Morris 11)

Even though Emerson severely criticised America for invading Mexico, oppressing and exploiting the blacks and denying the just rights of women, he never joined any organization. He spoke against the slave trade as early as the 1830s. In 1832, when he became pastor of the Second Church in Boston, he opened his pulpit to anti-slavery speakers and in 1844, he delivered an electrifying speech in Concord on the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies. This was his first powerful attack on the issue of slavery. His son, Edward Waldo Emerson wrote in *Emerson in Concord: A Memoir*:

From the beginning of the anti-slavery struggle Mr. Emerson stood for Freedom (indeed he had admitted anti-slavery speakers into his pulpit in Boston), although while honouring the courage and principle of the leaders of the agitation he disliked the narrowness and bitterness often shown by them and refused to come into harness of their organization. (75)

The addition of the territory of Mexico through war (1846-1848) gave rise to the slavery and antislavery tensions, resulting in the Compromise of 1850. By the Compromise, California was admitted as a free state, the territories of New Mexico and Utah would decide

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the slavery question for themselves by way of ‘popular sovereignty’ upon admission to the Union, the boundary between Texas and New Mexico was established, and the slave trade was abolished in Washington, D.C. The Compromise also included the Fugitive Slave Law, which required the return of runaway slaves to their owners. Many Northerners were furious over and unwilling to obey the Fugitive Slave Law resulting in a division between the North and South. Emerson too was outraged with thus Fugitive Slave Law and his journals and addresses were full of resentment and anger. Edward Waldo Emerson in *Emerson in Concord* records his father’s resentment:

The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act by Congress for a time darkened the face of the day, even to this Apostle of Hope. He woke in the mornings with a weight upon him. In his public speeches at this time he spoke of it as, “a law which every one of you will break on the earliest occasion; a law which no man can obey or abet without loss of self-respect and forfeiture of the name of a gentleman.” When his children told him that the subject given out for their next school composition was, The Building of a House, he said, “You must be sure to say that no house nowadays is perfect without having a nook where a fugitive slave can be safely hidden away.” The national disgrace took Mr. Emerson’s mind from poetry and philosophy, and almost made him for the time a student of law and an advocate. (77)

Emerson, in his initial years, did not show much interest in the feminist movement as he had a romantic notion of women. He regarded women as angel who made home a shrine of sanctity. Emerson expected women to inspire men to write, fight, build or compose scores. But the women were not expected to write, fight, build or compose scores. He writes in *The Journals*: “Woman should not be expected to write, or fight, or build, or compose scores; she does all by inspiring man to do all. The poet finds her eyes anticipating all his ode, the sculptor his god, the architect his house. She looks at it. She is the requiring genius”. (6: 134)

However, Emerson’s romantic view of women underwent a change when he saw them taking part in anti- slavery movements. As Emerson moved from place to place during the early days of Civil War in 1862 he could witness the humane service provided by thousands of women in the capacity of nurses, teachers, administrators and inspectors which changed his earlier apprehensions about women’s nobler sentiments being corrupted by

public realm or by holding office or assuming political office. In his 1855 address in the Woman's Rights Convention he says:

They have an unquestionable right to their own property. And if a woman demand votes, offices and political equality with men . . . it must not be refused . . . Let the laws be purged of every barbarous remainder, every barbarous impediment to women. Let the public donations for education be equally shared by them, let them enter a school as freely as a church, let them have and hold and give their property as men do theirs. (*Selected Lectures* 222-224)

Even though Bhima Bhoi's Dharma derived inspiration from indigenous religious traditions of India, his religion condemned the superstitions, idolatry, female infanticide and oppression by the priests, exploitation of women and the Varna system of Hinduism. The Brahmins were the privileged group in the society and a large number of untouchables remained outside the Varna system. This created an unequal order in the society with the upper caste people exploiting in every way the lower castes. Even Jagannath, the God of Universe was captured by the high caste people and the low castes were not allowed to enter temples or perform prayers. It was a fertile ground for a new religion to take its birth and try to alleviate the pain and suffering of the downtrodden.

Madhusudan Das had the opportunity of meeting Mahima Swami in 1864 in Patia, when the latter, had established his camp. Young Das was greatly moved by the magnetic personality of Mahima Swami and he appreciated the reformative ideas and broad social outlook as propounded by the religion. He compared the efforts of Mahima Swami to those of Raja Ram Mohan Ray and Dayananda Saraswati. He expressed his hope that the Mahima Cult would be a great contribution to the religious reform movement of the world. (Praharaj 119)

Mahima Dharma stunned everybody when its followers requested the villagers to give them cooked rice in place of uncooked grains. They did not make any distinctions of high and low caste while accepting food. The followers further ridiculed the systems of Hinduism in many other ways: they did not bathe or perform 'sandhya tarpan', they did not wear the 'tilak' (sacred mark on the forehead), they wore the bark of a tree in place of clothes and had matted locks on their head.

Bhima Bhoi who was the vanguard of Mahima Dharma was a revolutionary and a reformist who revolted against the suffering and distress of the nineteenth century Orissa seeking to bring reformation in the structure of the society. He rejected the importance of the wooden images of the Jagannath in the temples, rejected the *mahaprasad*, challenged the sanctity of Puri as a place of pilgrimage, and relegated Jagannath to a secondary position. Through this, he created a social space for the low-castes and untouchables within the structure of domination and infused confidence and dignity in the lives of the subordinate group. He showed them a way of rebelling against the atrocities that they had faced since ages. The attack on the temple of Jagannath at Puri in 1881 shows Bhima Bhoi's dissent and antagonism towards the inequality in society and that he was ready to fight a fierce battle against discrimination and hierarchy.

Moreover, Bhima Bhoi resisted and disregarded the rule of celibacy that was generally followed by priests and preachers. According to him, any man or woman, married or unmarried can follow Mahima Dharma. The followers of Mahima need not give up their worldly life to meditate on the Guru and hence does not create a dislocation in the family life. The followers are not required to lead an isolated life. Hence, Bhima combined in himself the roles of the worldly man and the spiritual man in preaching a faith and rejecting the prescriptions of caste while leading the life of a married man. Moreover, Mahima Dharma emphasizes on the dignity of women and helps them to lead a virtuous life. Bhima encouraged women to free themselves from the domestic life and meditate on Alekha. He questioned about the position of women in context to religion as women, then, were regarded as "gateway to hell" (*Popular Religion* 151) and "ascetism was generally attributed to men, and not to women, female sexuality being perceived as dangerous" (146). He says:

The men eat in any house.

And they become devotees of Mahima But, for reciting the name of Mahima,
why do your women lose this castes. (Baumer and Beltz 225)

Bhima Bhoi married Annapurna, a Brahmin woman who bore him a son, Kapileswar, and a daughter, Labanyabati. Annapurna came to share the veneration with Bhima Bhoi as Maa Annapurna. During the festival on the occasion of maghi purnima (full moon in January-February) at the Khaliapali asrama, Bhima Bhoi and Maa Annapurna sat on a raised platform to give *darsan* to their followers, who offered their prayer and worship. It showed that a man can lead a happy conjugal life and at the same time preach and practice spirituality. Mahima
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Dharma was a challenge against all the norms of Brahminical orthodoxy which believed that celibacy, chasteness and abstinence is required to be a saint. By admitting and initiating women into the fold of Mahima he revolted against the discrimination meted out to the women and sought to raise their status in the society. His marriage to Annapurna can be interpreted as a protest against all the social and religious norms, superstitions and dogmas of the society.

Bhima Bhoi occupies a vital place in the history of Mahima Cult. Despite his tribal origin and social backwardness, he emerged as a poet of great merit occupying a significant place in the cultural and literary history of Orissa. His several hundred psalms, hymns and prayers are considered to be the gems of the religious poetry of the Mahima cult. N.N.Vasu has paid tribute to Bhima Bhoi as a great socio and religious leader. He writes:

Ere long the fame of Bhima Bhoi spread far and wide. Hearing his immortal instruction helping in the attainment of real knowledge and illumining the head and the heart, the mighty pillars of the caste system stooped at his feet, though the blood of the low Kanda ran in his veins. They considered him a spark from the Eternal Flame of truth and knowledge. And then, before several years had elapsed, the Mahima Dharma could count its followers by thousands. (164)

Mayadhar Mansinha in his *Odiya Sahityara Itihasa* declares Bhima as “the greatest adivasi poet”. (206) “He was seen as a biplabi (revolutionary), a champion of social reform. Through his protest against idol worship and caste distinctions he sought to bring about a change in society” (*Religion, Law and Power* 104).

Emerson and Bhima Bhoi came from two contrasting societies with two diverse geographical and social background and dissimilar culture. Their paths never crossed each other nor were they aware of each other’s purpose in life. However, both of them emerged as advocates of the downtrodden and marginalised section of people living on the either side of the globe. Both of them were apostles of freedom fighting against the exploitation, victimization and oppression of individuals in different forms that prevailed in two different societies. Emerson had transformed himself from a scholar to a soldier to bring about fundamental change in the society. He was fighting for the rights of the blacks and the women, empowering them and also helped in altering the nations’ general attitude and point of view towards them. His legacy of revolution was literally heard throughout the country.

From a philosopher, he had transformed himself into a philosopher- in-action. Bhima Bhoi was also one such saint-poet -in-action who advocated for a society based on equality and indiscrimination. Like Emerson, he criticised injustice present in the society based on caste, class and gender and believed that true religion was above all discrimination and prejudice. Both of them believed that a change in the heart and mind of people can bring about change and transformation in the society. Emerson and Bhima Bhoi did not merely present an utopian view of future but through their writings and actions showed that an egalitarian society can be established. Both of them were preaching equality in society, rationality, challenging authority and insisting people to fight for their own identity. Geographically separated yet united by the suffering of humanity, Emerson and Bhima Bhoi were the two leading minds of nineteenth century America and Orissa who not only documented the atrocities and inhumanity that the blacks, women and low caste people faced but also fought for their rights, propagated individualism and tried to establish an unbiased and non-discriminatory society.

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