CHAPTER VII

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It is difficult to reconstruct a systematic and scientific history of Mahima religion due to the paucity of adequate contemporary material. Mahima Swami, the founder of the religion, left no account of this religion. In this thesis sincere attempt has been made to throw light on the genesis, development, religious practices of this faith on the basis of available primary sources, field study and interview with its followers. As far as possible dichronic and synchronic approaches have been adopted to understand the various aspects of this religion.

Mahima dharma began in the nineteenth century. Basically it represented a reform movement deriving inspiration from indigenous religious traditions of India. Several factors contributed to the rise of the new religion. The social and religious background of the nineteenth century Orissa are as much important as the vision of its founder, Mahima Swami. The society was divided into four varnas with its hundred of castes grouped under the traditional thirty six patakas.\(^1\) The Brahmanas, though numerically small, were the privileged section of the society.\(^2\) There were a large number of untouchable

\(^1\) W.W. Hunter, Orissa, p.52.
\(^2\) Ibid., p.38.
classes and tribes who remained outside the varna system. They were generally poor and had no role in religious rites. This unequal social order seems to have generated tension and in due course the lower classes wanted to free themselves from the oppression of the priest-ridden society. The sutee system, female infanticide, the cruel practices of Churk Puja were the bane of Hinduism. The cult of Jagannath though popular had lost its sanctity. Taking advantage of the prevailing situation the Christian missionaries made their appearance in Orissa in the early part of the nineteenth century and began to condemn the superstition and idolatry. Sadhu Sundar Das, the notable social reformer of Orissa, invited the missionaries, assimilated some of their ideas, particularly the ten commandments. But without being converted into Christianity he had given a rational approach to religion which had the Vedantic foundation. Like Sadhu Sundar Das, Mahima Swami appeared as a saviour of the oppressed people and checked the growth of Christianity. It indirectly saved Hindu religion and Hindu culture.

3. W.W. Hunter, Orissa, p. 78.
4. A. Sutton, Orissa and its Evangelization, p. 103.
5. Ibid., p. 156.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
The available sources do not help us to know precisely the early life of this great religious leader. The followers of this religion, as a matter of religious principle, regard the founder as unborn and beyond human comprehension. It is believed that he came from the Himalayas and made his first appearance at Puri sometimes in 1826 A.D. He travelled far and wide in Puri, Khandagiri hill and their neighbouring areas. He went to Balasingha in Boudh. His visit to Balasingha is hither to unknown but it is corroborated by the writings of Bhima Bhoi. Then he moved to Kapilas at Dhenkanal in 1836. During this period he was a Saiva mendicant and engaged himself in philanthropic work. As it is published in the contemporary newspaper it seems to be correct. Here he initiated Govind Das, the first of the sixty four siddhas. Then he proceeded to Redhakhol to initiate Bhima Bhoi. He left Kapilas in 1862 and started his missionary career. His first

8. JASP, Vol.LI, 1882, p.3.
11. JIC, Part VI, p.1334.
visit was to Kasipur\textsuperscript{15} in Dhenkanal district. He visited several places like Daruthenga\textsuperscript{16} where he was proclaimed as Mahima Gosain. He travelled all over Orissa, built \textit{tungis} and established \textit{dhunis} till his death. He breathed his last at Joranda in 1876.\textsuperscript{17} Subsequently this \textit{samadhi} became the \textit{Sunya Mandir}.\textsuperscript{18} Throughout his life he earned the respect and admiration of the common people and after his death he came to be regarded as \textit{Param Brahman}. He never thought of founding a "new religion. His mission was to provide solace to suffering masses through uttering the name of formless God and devotion to Him."\textsuperscript{19} In describing the life sketch of this great saint of Orissa legend is mingled with historical facts and it is difficult to extract the detail and authentic life sketch of Mahima Swami, especially his early life, but from the available evidences one can understand the need of the age and the mission he fulfilled in the light of the requirement.

Mahima Swami had written nothing about his religion or philosophy. Bhima Bhoi and Biswanath Baba have represented

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\textsuperscript{15} Biswanath Baba, \textit{Satya Mahima Dharma Itihasa}, p.63.
\textsuperscript{16} JASB, 1882, Vol.II, p.3.
\textsuperscript{17} Biswanath Baba, \textit{Satya Mahima Dharma Itihasa}, p.282.
\textsuperscript{18} Biswanath Baba, \textit{Mahima Gadi Mahima Dharma Itihasa}, p.9.
\textsuperscript{19} JTC, Part VI, p.1336.
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the simple and brief teaching of Mahima Swami. Their Reality is non-dual. He is Niranjan, Anakara, Alekha, Mahima and Sunya. Mahima occupies a unique place in this faith. Mahima and Param Brahman are identical with each other. Mahima is not an attribute of Param Brahman. Alekha Brahman is both with shape and without shape. It gives prime importance to the name Alekha Mahima. Though they believe in the guruvada, the para sanyasi or any human being can never be the guru. Their guru is Alekha Param Brahman himself. All these are not new trends of religion. He accumulated his ideas from the religious traditions of India, but with a simpler form which appeals the sentiment of the common people. He rejected...

22. Ibid., p.15.
23. Ibid., p.2.
24. Ibid., p.39.
27. Bhima Bhoi, Stuti Chintamani, p.163.
the ritualism, ascetism and all the rigorous practices. He put forth before the mass the critical aspect of the religion in such a simple manner that can they understand its theme and are attracted towards it. Though they believe in *Pinda Brahmanda*, they do not practise *Hata Yoga* or *Kaya Yoga*. The inward realization of *Brahman* can be possible by the constant thinking of the name itself. This is perhaps the easiest way in Indian philosophy to realize the *Brahman*.

Another unique feature of this religion is *Brahmanana Bhakti Yoga*. It is the addition of Biswanath Baba. It is to know the *Brahman*, then to surrender Him completely by *bhakti*. This *bhakti* can be possible by following the code of conduct which will make a man disciplined one.

Mahima Swami by his missionary career gave a strong base to the religion. The *tungi, dhuni, Valvalila* became the means of his propagation. The personality of Mahima Swami and simplicity of the religion became an attraction to this faith. In the caste-ridden society the door of Mahima dharma was open to all. He gathered a large number of followers in the coastal and tribal areas and initiated sixty four *siddhas*. After the

death of Mahima Swami, the sixty four siddhas propagated the religion in and outside Orissa. The devotional songs of Bhima Bhoi helped much to popularise the cult among the common people. The religious system of the Kumbhipatias received a new life when Bhima Bhoi became a preacher of this system. He converted maximum number of tribals into the faith. It is a common notion that the Mahima followers attacked the Jagannath temple and Bhima Bhoi was the leader of this mad proposition. The involvement of Bhima Bhoi in this incident is not corroborated by contemporary evidence. It is a growing religion in Orissa even today and in its neighbouring states such as Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Assam and Andhra Pradesh. Biswanath Baba the living exponent of the religion has made sustained effort to make it popular throughout the nook and corner of Orissa and even outside the State.

A follower, has to observe a pious life. The code of conduct makes a man disciplined one in the society. There is no ritualism or sacrifice in it. He who wants can adopt

this path of life along with his day to day modern life. Anybody can never be a sanyasi without the permission of his parents. This shows that the religion does not create dislocation in the family life. It does not believe in ascetism. The sanyasi is not allowed to lead an isolated life. He will always pray for the welfare of the society.\(^39\) This creates good feeling among the people and not to think evil of other. This religion emphasises the dignity of women and help them to lead a virtuous life.\(^40\) It enjoins them to be good housewives and discharge their duties to other members of the family keeping with the highest traditions of our culture. Harmony in family life and the importance given on educating the children, emphasized by this religion, is not only act as a preventive for many social evils such as divorce but also has a positive role for improving the quality of life in the society as a whole. This religion envisages happy conjugal life\(^41\) and at the same time a detached life. The couple will lead the life of brother and sister after the birth of a son. The devotional singing in every evening provides solace to the people suffering from the stress and

\(^39\) Biswanath Baba, *Satya Mahima Dharma Itihasa*, p.38.


\(^41\) Bhima Bhoi, *Sruti Nisedha Gita*, pp.16-17.
strain of life, Satsangagosthi, which Mahima Swami introduced, develops the spirit of brotherhood and equality before the eyes of Alekha Mahima. The annaviksa of Mahima Swari from Bhima Bhoi establishes the socio-religious equality of the low and high and removes the barrier between the touchables and untouchables. A sanyasi moves from place to place and propagates the noble values of this religion for the good and happiness of the people. The deep concern for the welfare of the humanity is reflected in the prayer of the sanyasi after the bhiksa.\[42\]

Mahima dharma is a missionary religion but its followers can be classified into gruhi\[43\] and sanyasi.\[44\] The sanyasis are broadly divided into three categories - tyagi vairagi, aparā sanyasi and para sanyasi. Joranda Gadi is the principal centre of this religion. The temples at Joranda do not have their presiding deities which shows their faith in Sunya Brahman. The simple rites at Joranda present a contrast to the costly and complicated rituals of traditional Hinduism.

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42. Biswanath Baba, *Satya Mahima Dharma Itihasa*, p.38.
44. Ibid., p.165.
This religion is not the residue of Buddhism. It is rooted in the Vedic foundation. It is an indigenous reform movement within the Hindu fold. But it has its distinct identity with the emphasis on visuddhavaitavada. It does not accept maya as the cause of creation. It admits that the world is a real creation of Him through His Mahima. Lord Jagannath of Puri, the highest deity of Hinduism, is considered identical with Krishna, Vishnu but Mahima religion does not believe in image worship and the supremacy of Lord Jagannath as such. Mahima Swami had to fight like a reformer against the Brahmanical orthodoxy to establish the socio-religious in the socio-religious field. Though it emerged as a challenge against the Brahmanical orthodoxy, it was not specifically meant against the Brahmins. The Mahimaites do not accept food from the Brahmins. This is in conformity with the sympathy for the down trodden masses. It may be noted that even some Brahmins also accepted the religion and some kings like the rulers of Dhenkanal, Athagarh, Patia, Boudh patronized this religion. It was a socio-religious movement against the

45. Biswanath Baba, Mahima Dharma and Baudha Dharma, p.32.
46. Ibid., p.34.
47. Ibid., p.35.
49. B.C.Mazumdar, Sonepur in the Sambalpur Tract, Appendix-IV, p.129.
superstition and dogmas of the society. The movement is successful as it affected and continues to affect the lifestyle of the common people. It has universal appeal as it is based upon rational principle. This religion is ethical and rich in humanistic tendency. The redemption of the society is the main aim of it. A true follower has to pray the Alekha Bram Brahman for the good of the entire mankind. This is beautifully expressed in the words of Bhima Bhoi, "How can I remain silent seeing the sorrows and suffering of the people. Let me stay in hell forever, if, Oh Lord! that saves the world".50