

Babas and Alekhs – A Religion in Its Making

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MAHIMA DHARMA

Mahima Dharma, literally “the glorious *dharma*¹,” represents a contemporary ascetic tradition in Orissa. It is a new ascetic religion which is still in its making. Mahima Dharma consists of monks and laymen. The monastic organisation is represented by two brotherhoods of monks, the Balkaldhari and the Kaupindhari, mostly dispersed throughout central Orissa (Dhenkanal). These two ascetic groups are organised around a network of local centres with their institutional axis in the holy city of Joranda in central Dhenkanal. The laymen followers mainly come from the rural and, only recently, also from the indigenous population in Orissa.² There are no official statistics concerning the number of monks and devotees. According to informal accounts³ approximately 100 ascetics live permanently in Joranda and another 900 move from one holy centre to another. Around 10,000 registered devotees in Joranda are responsible for the livelihood of the ascetics and the financing of the various monastic centres. We can assume less than one per cent of the total population of Orissa⁴ defines themselves as members of Mahima Dharma.

The main features of the new religion are asceticism, a caste-denying character, and a conception of god that lies between heno- and monotheism.⁵ Mahima Dharmis worship Mahima Alekh as the highest, unwritten (*a-lekh*⁶), indescribable, and only God. Mahima Alekh is conceived to be *sunya* – the void – all and nothing. This God can only be approached by meditation, an ascetic life-style, and ritual practices and is thus opposed to idol worship. The concepts and values go back to the founder of the religion Mahima Gosvami who lived at the beginning of the 19th century. His origin is unknown, but his devotees consider Mahima Gosvami to be the incarnation of Mahima Alekh.

BRIEF COMPERISON OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS OF MAHIMA DHARMA

My research was conducted in two districts:

in Dhenkanal and Koraput. In those two regions I observed diverse profiles of the Mahima Dharma doctrine.

Dhenkanal

Predominant in Dhenkanal – the region of the origin and propagation of the ascetic tradition – is the monastic and polycentric⁷ structure of the doctrine. The monastic organisation, which branches out into local centres of worship is always connected with local ruling elites who provide for the ascetics (*babas*). By sponsoring the holy men, in rituals as well as in providing the places of worship, worldly patrons gain religious merits⁸ and the moral reconfirmation of being a good local ruler. Thus in Dhenkanal, Mahima Dharma reflects the local patronage system and the tie between local leaders and ascetics (*babas*).

Koraput

In Koraput – the missionary area of the doctrine – professional ascetics and their patrons are rare; *babas* appear once a year to initiate new devotees (*dikhya*). In their place local specialists – the *alekh gurumai* – perform all ecstatic⁹ singing rituals. Following Kakar¹⁰, Vitebsky¹¹, Vargyas¹², and Atkinson¹³, I will call these local religious specialists “alekh shamans.” Apart from the *dikhya* ceremony, they are self-sufficient. Their ecstatic song séances are the crucial rituals in the missionary areas. As such, the “alekh shamans” illustrate local therapeutic and prophetic actions as well as transport a rich local culture of oral literature and poetry.

The two different regions depict two facets of asceticism. In Dhenkanal, we face the Hindu version of institutionalised world renunciation closely tied to the patronage of local rulers. Such a link between local leaders and ascetics is in accord with a well-known model of Indian kingship¹⁴ as described, for instance, by Bouillier¹⁵ and discussed extensively by Quigley.¹⁶ The asceticism of Mahima Dharma in Dhenkanal seems to represent patterns of Indian kingship at a very local level. In this context, male ascetics (*babas*) ritually interact with

various worldly patrons who historically were tied to “little kings” of Orissa and who exercise a local political influence to this day.¹⁷ The monastic asceticism of Mahima Dharma might also be comparable to Buddhist structures of monasticism, in which kings are closely allied with ascetics.¹⁸

In Koraput the character of Mahima Dharma has to be assessed in a completely different way. Here asceticism results in ecstasy, but is characterized by permanent “negative rules”¹⁹ of conduct which I refer to as “negative ecstasy.” Ecstasy can thus be attained through the ascetic techniques of fasting, vegetarian diet and abstention from alcohol. In Koraput such an ascetic ethic is new and has been popularised by female and male shamans. In contrast to the male ascetics (*babas*) of the religious centres in Dhenkanal, ecstatic female and male *gurumai* represent the religious specialists in the periphery. The knowledge system of the new religion in Koraput lies not in an institutionalised set of values and ideas, but in the non-systemic expression of ecstasy, which is considered as divine speech and given highest authority.

Whereas the local Alekh *gurumai* tradition represents a matrilinear tradition in Koraput, the monk-organisation in Dhenkanal is shaped by a ritual androcentricity and a patrilineal structure. Religious specialists (*gurumai*) in Koraput have an extensive relationship to their mother’s line. Their spiritual teacher (*guru*) is always classified as *mamu* (MB), and the predisposition for ecstatic capacities, needed for all ritual activities is inherited from the mother’s line. If the mother or/and her younger sister (MyZ) has been a devoted singer of the divine and healing specialists it is probable that their children will have the same vocation.

After this general introduction we should direct our attention to the context of *babas* of Mahima Dharma.

THE CONTEXT OF BABAS

The stages of world renunciation begin with the role of a young *tyagi*, who wanders for about ten to fifteen years. This role then leads to a senior *das*, who, as a semi-migrant ascetic, maintains a sort of continuous sacred residence for a further fifteen to twenty-five years. Finally, the role culminates in the position of authority assumed by the most senior *abadhuta samnyasin* who move on bare feet from their permanent sacral abode only on special ritual occasions. It

is notable that the monastic hierarchy rests upon a strong principle of seniority.

Ideally, every Mahima Dharma ascetic is considered a wandering *samnyasin*. In reality, ascetics differ in terms of seniority and in relation to religious tasks performed, thus making holy men more or less mobile. Mobility and social independence are grounded in the ideal of world renunciation that demands one to abandon worldly relations of the family and the caste (*jati*).²⁰ An ascetic will never marry and never come back to his place of birth. He is considered socially dead, a living phantom²¹ who – while physically living – has reached the highest status of religious deliverance, *moksha*. As one who is not “of this world” he still goes out into the world in order to become a ritual specialist of several fire-rituals (*ghiopura*, *chatordosi*, *jagia*). He survives only by begging and by his devotion to God. The ascetic ideal of Mahima Dharma is therefore deeply embedded into the traditional Indian ideal of world renunciation.²² Nevertheless, the fire-ritual – as the crucial characteristic of Mahima Dharma ascetics – constitutes a contradiction to the classical ideal of the ascetic as an “*anagni*,” someone who has left the fire (of the house)!²³ The focus on the fire ritual, instead, would lead to the conclusion that Mahima Dharma asceticism borrows from the dominant brahmanic culture and its vedic heritage.²⁴ Nonetheless, one should not ignore the official affirmation of Mahima Dharma ascetics to be “anti-brahmanic.”

The locally specific configuration of Indian ascetic, vedic (brahmanic) heritage and its indigenous critique reveals a syncretistic feature in Mahima Dharma. Mahima Dharma can thus be seen as a popular tradition of asceticism, which fits well into the heterogeneity and syncretism of Indian local traditions. The affirmed “anti-brahmanism” might indicate the local configuration of power connected to the ascetics’ patrons, who represent village headmen from non-brahmanical origin.

CODE OF CONDUCT FOR ASCETICS

Ascetics of all stages have to obey the rules of conduct (*guruagya*), which Mahima Gosvami gave to his followers. The main principle of ascetic life in Mahima Dharma is severe discipline. Discipline of mind, body, and action provides a framework for ethical and ritual life conduct. The rules include strict celibacy, no idol-worship, a vegetarian diet, daily prayers seven times before

sunrise and five times before sunset, no meal after sunset, one meal (*vikhya*) from one devotee a day, a strong restriction not to stay more than one night in one village (and that always outside the house) and, finally, the ritual obligation to perform *jagia* (fire-ritual) for the well-being of society. The *babas* worship the highest and only god Mahima Alekh without interference. They live in simplicity, without property, and are devoted to radical trust in God. Their strict respect of the religious codex is seen as a proof of their deep religiosity and finally as crucial indication of their religious authority.

MONASTIC BUREAUCRACY

One of the most important features of institutionalisation processes of in the monastic tradition of Mahima Dharma is the bureaucracy within the Mahima Dharma doctrine.²⁵ Its centre is the holy city of Joranda in central Dhenkanal. Here, *identity cards*²⁶ for devotees and *babas* are printed and delivered. It is here as well that the monastic education takes place and the literary works of Bhima Bhoi and other elder *babas* are being canonised.

In Joranda we note the processes of institutionalisation and canonisation through which books are considered holy or not. Identity cards for *babas* and *bhaktas* as well as address lists of devotees create a bureaucratic network, which becomes crucial in the development of new emerging centres in the periphery of Joranda.

THE ALEKHS

Mahima Dharma in Koraput is known as Alekh dharma or is associated with *alekhs*. *Alekhs* wear *gerua*-coloured clothes and worship the God Mahima Alekh and the earth goddess Basmati or Basudha. *Alekhs* use a symbolic code in their dress. The colour of their clothes (*gerua*) is the same as the colour of the red anthills, local manifestations of the earth goddess. A symbolic identification with the goddess makes *alekhs* as holy as the earth. *Alekh* specialists become ecstatic *alekh gurumai* and, as such, capable of divine communication. As oracles, as husbands or wives of the earth goddess or other male and female Hindu deities, *alekh gurumai* become ecstatic singers of the Divine.

THE SPREAD OF MAHIMA DHARMA

In the last decade, proselytising ascetics from

Dhenkanal (*babas*) spread the religion among the population of Koraput.²⁷ The statistics compiled by the Tribal Research Bureau in 1968/69²⁸ indicate the existence of the religion since the 1950s in areas of Orissa predominantly populated by the indigenous population. Through several interviews with ascetics of Mahima Dharma during my field research in Dhenkanal (1999/2000), proselytising activities of the *babas* in Koraput could be confirmed during the *tyagi*-wandering-period of every ascetic.²⁹ According to my recent observations in Koraput, similar activities by *babas* from Dhenkanal could only be observed during the annual initiation time (*dikhya*) in February/March (*phalguno*). Temporal proselytising activities can thus be assumed to have existed in the region for the last fifty years. The initiations performed by *babas* from Dhenkanal are conducted in local places of worship where locally popular *alekh gurumai* (shamans) have established their own centres frequented by their own circles of devotees for pilgrimages at the local level. In the form of an identity card received by the new devotees, the recent adherents are statistically registered as belonging to the Mahima Dharma community. Identity cards are handed over to the converts after payments of the necessary fees to the *babas*. I have found two generations of converts to Mahima Dharma in Koraput. They mostly represent persons around 50-60 years of age whose adult (20-35) children took the initiation (*dikhya*) during the last ten years. The annual initiation ritual (*dikhya*) involves approximately 2000 - 3000 new adherents, a number that usually increases annually.

CONVERSION TO THE ALEKH RELIGION

Conversion is conceptualised in terms of initiation (*dikhya*) into the new religion. The procedure contains a generalised and a specialised complex and thus establishes two categories of devotees: 1) the common *alekhs* and 2) the specialised *alekh gurumai*.

1) In order to become an *alekh* one has to undergo the initiation either conducted either by a *baba* from Dhenkanal or by an “elder brother” of a local Alekh centre. The latter is authorised by monks from Dhenkanal to perform his ritual functions. The initiation involves “taking” the sacred clothes, or “colours,” and taking an oath to God to adhere strictly to the religious rules (*niyam*) of Mahima Dharma. *Alekhs* define

themselves via a strict ascetic ethic based upon the negative rules of conduct. They abstain from meat as well as from alcohol and refuse to participate actively in traditional blood sacrifices. As such, they are a new and contrasting ascetic category within the local population (Desya),³⁰ who are reputed for their “pleasure complex,”³¹ characterised by a variety of ceremonies, general intoxication and a preference for meat.

2) The new religious specialists of *alekhs* are the *alekh gurumai*. They perform séances of ecstatic singing for purposes of divination, labelled here shamanic practices. The *alekh gurumai* – female or male, but mostly female – communicate with the Divine while singing with the single-stringed instrument *dudunga*.³² They proceed on a spiritual journey while being in trance and cure patients by questioning the supernatural. To become an *alekh gurumai*, it is necessary to convince the community that he or she had no choice but to undergo the *alekh dikhya*. *Alekh gurumai* often relate their prolonged suffering, destructive dreams and attacks of insanity (*baya*) before being compelled to undergo *dikhya*. Had they refused, they insist, they would have died. Only by receiving the *gerua* clothes were they able to be cured. In this way, their destructive madness (*baya*) was transformed into its contrary, the capacity to heal and communicate with the supernatural, or what is called “good” *baya*.

BUREAUCRATIC IDENTITY

Every *alekh* is proud to possess an own *identity card* (in English, Hindi and Oriya), which provides him or her with a statistical identity within the Mahima Dharma society (*samaj*).

“*Sri Gassi Ram Bhakta*³³ is devotee in our Kaupin Dhari Mahima Samaj. After observing his pure character the Samaj issued this Identity Card in favour of him.

The person having not possessed this Card shall not be taken as a Member of this Samaj. So the Samaj shall not be held responsible for any anti-religious activities of such persons having no Identity Card.

The president of this Samaj reserves all the rights to take disciplinary actions as determined by the Samaj against the Identity Card Holders who will intrigue the Rules, Regulations and Sanctity of this Religion.

Annual Subscription Rs. 25.”

By paying their dues to the religious centre in Joranda, *alekhs* gain rights and duties within the institution and thus develop a new official religious identity. However, they can also be sanctioned by the authorities, if they violate religious law. The religious centre in Joranda represents thus a juridical entity for the devotees.

The great importance attached to the issuing and possessing of the *identity card* indicates a move toward institutionalisation within what was initially a reformist religious movement.³⁴ On the other hand *alekh* identity expresses a degree of opposition to the bureaucratic terms of the Indian administration. *Alekhs* refuse to classify themselves as “Adivasi.”³⁵ They are *alekhs* – with pride. The official written proof that one is a member of the Hindu Mahima Dharma society (*samaj*) in Dhenkanal gives the cardholder a moral dignity and legal identity.³⁶ As such, *alekhs* resist being categorised by the Indian administration. Within the current administrative terminology *alekhs* become their own agents and construct their own administrative and social identity.

CONCLUSION

Mahima Dharma in Dhenkanal and Alekh dharma in Koraput can be regarded as two facets of a new religion. With *babas* we see processes of institutionalisation within the monastic order and its bureaucracy. With the tribal converts we see the continuity of a local shamanic tradition expressed in ecstatic dialogues with the Divine. Both regional features illustrate a rich diversity within an ascetic doctrine in its making. The making of a religion is thus related to monastic institutionalisation and bureaucracy. In regard to the new ascetic ethic in tribal context, Alekh dharma illustrates an example of how cultural change is linked with local continuity.

I suggest an interpretation of the cultural dynamics of Mahima Dharma in Orissa in terms of a cultural *bricolage*³⁷ dependent on its local context. A *bricolage* is the creation of tradition by recomposing common elements in order to innovate. In Dhenkanal Mahima Dharma recomposes the Indian model of local patronage and kingship. In Koraput new religious specialists act in a traditional ecstatic way, but adopt an abstinent life conduct.

By comparing the regions we discover facets of cultural creativity, which copes with social

change by preserving local values.

KEYWORDS Asceticism; ecstasy; conversion; ascetics; female religiosity; cultural change.

ABSTRACT In this paper I would like to present some results of my research on diverse profiles of ascetic cultures in Orissa. In the first section I will describe monastic structures of the new religion shaped by male ascetics. Then I will present missionary areas in tribal Orissa where female religiosity is crucial. The processes of institutionalisation and diversity shall be in addition demonstrated within the Mahima Dharma religious doctrine.

NOTES

- 1 This polysemic socio-religious concept of South-Asian ethics might be translated as “religious order.” For discussion see: O’ Flaherty and Duncan Derrett (eds.), 1978.
- 2 See: Eschmann, 1975: 9-22; *ibid.*, 1986 (1978): 386-387; T.R.B., 1968: 9-52. My own observations during my fieldwork in the Koraput district confirm this statement.
- 3 This was derived from conversations with several ascetics who confidentially told me about the numbers. The access to internal information about the monastic organisation is reserved to monks only.
- 4 Total population of Orissa estimated in 1994 is 33.795.000, in Microsoft World Atlas, 2001.
- 5 In reference to the neologism of Friedrich Max Mueller, henotheism means the belief-system in one highest god to whom the devotee is mostly emotionally attached. It implies the existence of other inferior gods. Monotheism means the belief in one and only one god.
- 6 A-lekha was explained to me as “not to write/unwritten,” which refers to the every day usage. The term itself means in Sanskrit “without writing,” “illiterate,” indicating a pejorative meaning.
- 7 At least five “official” *tirthas* 1) Joranda 2) Kamakhianagar 3) Angarabanda 4) Jaka 5) Barampur exist. Beside these Khaliapalli as the holy place of Bhima Bhoi, the famous poet of the religion, is of greatest importance. For works on Bhima Bhoi see Beltz, 2002, Mohapatra 1983.
- 8 For more details see: Guzy, 2000: 326-327.
- 9 The term “ecstasy” derives from the Greek origin *ekstasis*, translated as an alienation from external reality. By reference to psychoanalytical and sociological approaches Zinser (1988: 274-284) offers various definitions of ecstasy as “abnormal” or “altered state of consciousness”. The terms “ecstatic” or “ecstasy” refer to an altered state of consciousness here following Lewis (1971).
- 10 Kakar, 1984: 92-121. By reference to the crucial work of Lévi-Strauss on “the effectiveness of symbols,” Kakar classifies local Indian healing specialists as shamans. They, in terms of Lévi-Strauss, give a symbolic language to their suffering clients. Kakar’s descriptions of the therapeutic and ritual specialists of the Oraon tribe (95-111) correspond with my own ethnographic observations among the *Alekhs* of the Koraput.
- 11 In his book Vitebsky (1993) deals with Sora shamanism. He describes Sora cosmological concepts, personality and specific ideas of continuity structured around dialogues with the dead. In his analysis, the oral polyphonic character plays a crucial role during shamanic sessions. Later (Vitebsky, 1995) he establishes a general description of different features of the unsystematic shamanic religion.
- 12 Vargyas, 1993: 120-127; *ibid.*, 1994: 123-175. Vargyas’ studies in South East Asia emphasize the oral literary character of shamanic phenomena.
- 13 Atkinson, 1992: 307-330. In her review article Atkinson refers to the different topics within the scholarly constructed models of “shamanism.” Aware of the criticism concerning the western category, she postulates a change to the plural form “shamanisms.” A single narrow concept is thus substituted “in favour of close scrutiny of local practices embedded in particular historical, cultural, and social contexts (321).” In order to cultivate interdisciplinary dialogues beyond local ethnographic results, Atkinson argues for the preservation of the studies on shamanisms.
- 14 See: Cohn, 1990 (1962); Dirks, 1979; Galey, 1989; Schnepel, 1997.
- 15 Bouillier, 1997.
- 16 Quigley, 1999.
- 17 For details see: Guzy, 2003.
- 18 Tambiah, 1976.
- 19 By “negative rules” I refer to the classical Durkheimian definition of ritual practices. Durkheim differentiates between the “negative cult” and the “positive cult”. The “negative character” of a cult is represented by a system of restrictions, especially visible in ascetic rituals. He considers the “positive character” of a cult to be a sacrifice, connected with ceremonies (see: Durkheim, 1991 (1912), third book, chapter I -IV, 510-649).
- 20 See: Dumont, 1966: 324-350.
- 21 For comparison of the *samnyasin* with the ghost of the dead (*preta*) see: Sprockhoff, 1980: 263-284.
- 22 For further comparison see: Ghurye, 1953; Burghart, 1983: 635-53.
- 23 See: Olivelle, 1992; Michaels, 1998.
- 24 Here I am referring to the work of Staal, 1983.
- 25 See: Deo, 1999: 137-151.
- 26 Original term.
- 27 In Koraput the proselytising *babas* belong to the Kaupindhari brotherhood.
- 28 T.R.B., 1968/69: 43-76. The statistics were compiled in indigenous areas of the Puri, Cuttack, Sambalpur, and Kalahandi district.
- 29 The *tyagi* period is the 15-year long period of learning and wandering before taking the final decision to remain an itinerant for one’s whole life.
- 30 For details on the Desya see: Pfeffer, 1997:3-27; *ibid.*, 2000: 331-346; *ibid.*, 2002 (in press); Berger, 2002: 91-120; Otten, 2000: 347-356.
- 31 Orans (1965) has coined the term for the Santal of Jharkandh, West Bengal and northern Orissa, but

- the same reputation is associated with the indigenous population of southern Orissa.
- 32 Apart from the ritual context of the *alekhs*, the instrument is also used by the Joria (an indigenous group of Koraput). Here, the instrument is called *lorunga* (personal communication with P. Berger).
- 33 Name changed.
- 34 I. B. Dube is also observing the same processes, see: Dube, 1999: 98-125; *ibid.*, 2001:149-178.
- 35 Common term for non-Hindu indigenous populations that in classical Hindu categories are considered as not belonging to the caste-system and as such as of lowest status. Generally Adivasi implicates a pejorative connotation such as "primitive", "without culture".
- 36 The article of Lund, 2001: 3-24 can be seen as an inspiring paper towards anthropological investigations on the relationship between personal documents, bureaucratic space and the modern construction of national identity.
- 37 Term borrowed from Lévi-Strauss, 1962: Chap. I.
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