

# Mahimā Dharma and its Interfaith Connections: A Comprehensive Study

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## Abstract:

Mahimā Dharma, a religious movement founded in the Indian state of Odisha, has remained relatively unexplored in the realm of interfaith studies. This research paper seeks to delve into the historical, philosophical, and sociocultural aspects of Mahimā Dharma and examine its connections with other major religions. The paper explores how Mahimā Dharma's unique syncretic elements have facilitated interfaith dialogue and interactions with Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and indigenous tribal beliefs in the region. By analyzing the core tenets, rituals, and beliefs of Mahimā Dharma, we will unveil its potential contributions to the broader discourse on interfaith harmony and understanding.

## Keywords:

Mahimā Dharma, interfaith connections, syncretism, religious movements, Odisha, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, indigenous beliefs, interfaith dialogue, religious diversity.

## Introduction:

The religious landscape of India has long been marked by a rich tapestry of beliefs, practices, and traditions, representing the diverse and pluralistic nature of the country. Among the many religious movements that have emerged, Mahimā Dharma, founded in the state of Odisha, remains a relatively unexplored phenomenon in the context of interfaith studies. This comprehensive study seeks to examine the historical, philosophical, and sociocultural aspects of Mahimā Dharma and its intricate connections with other major religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and indigenous tribal beliefs. By investigating Mahimā Dharma's core tenets, rituals, and interactions, this paper aims to unravel its significance in promoting interfaith harmony and understanding in the broader religious landscape.

The historical evolution of Mahimā Dharma is a fascinating journey that reveals the origins, development, and key milestones of this unique religious movement in the Indian state of Odisha. Understanding its historical context is essential to appreciate the movement's significance in the broader religious landscape of India. Mahimā Dharma's origins can be traced back to the late 19th century in the eastern state of Odisha. It was founded by Mahima Gosain, a charismatic and enigmatic spiritual leader, who is believed to have received divine revelations. Mahima Gosain's teachings emphasized the worship of the Mahimā Swaroopa, an abstract form of the divine that transcended traditional idol worship. This departure from conventional religious practices marked the beginning of a distinct religious movement.

The early development of Mahimā Dharma was largely characterized by a focus on simplicity and humility. Followers of this faith were often itinerant mendicants who renounced material possessions and lived a life of austerity. Their teachings gained popularity among marginalized and oppressed communities, providing them with a sense of spiritual equality and social justice. Apart from Mahima Gosain, several prominent figures played pivotal roles in the evolution of Mahimā Dharma. His disciple and successor, Bhima Bhoi, is renowned for his devotional poetry and for further propagating the movement's principles of humility, devotion, and compassion. Bhima Bhoi's verses are revered within the Mahimā Dharma tradition and are still studied today. The spread of Mahimā Dharma beyond its place of origin was facilitated by its itinerant preachers and devoted followers. Over time, it gained a considerable following, particularly among the lower

castes and oppressed communities. The movement's message of equality and the rejection of caste hierarchy resonated with those who had long suffered from social discrimination.

Influence and interactions with indigenous tribal communities in the region further enriched the religious tapestry of Mahimā Dharma. The movement adapted to incorporate local tribal beliefs, promoting a sense of syncretism and unity among diverse groups. Today, Mahimā Dharma continues to evolve as it adapts to the changing social and cultural landscape of India. It has gained recognition and respect for its contributions to interfaith dialogue, social justice, and its unique approach to spirituality. The historical evolution of Mahimā Dharma showcases the movement's ability to adapt, integrate, and inspire diverse communities, offering a distinct and syncretic approach to spirituality that challenges conventional religious norms and hierarchy. Understanding this evolution is crucial for appreciating its contemporary relevance and its interfaith connections with other religions.

The contemporary relevance of Mahimā Dharma is notable for its continued impact on various aspects of Indian society, spirituality, and interfaith relations. Despite its origins in the late 19th century, Mahimā Dharma remains a dynamic and evolving religious movement that continues to shape and influence the modern landscape in multiple ways. Mahimā Dharma's syncretic and inclusive nature has made it a symbol of interfaith understanding and harmony. Its teachings of simplicity, humility, and the rejection of caste hierarchy resonate with people from diverse religious backgrounds. The movement has been a catalyst for fostering dialogue and cooperation between adherents of different faiths, contributing to religious pluralism in India. The movement's emphasis on social justice and the equality of all individuals regardless of their caste or social status remains highly relevant in contemporary India, where caste-based discrimination and inequality persist. Mahimā Dharma's teachings continue to inspire social activists and organizations working to address these issues, advocating for a more equitable and just society. In a world characterized by religious diversity, Mahimā Dharma's ability to incorporate elements from various religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous tribal beliefs, showcases the potential for spiritual syncretism. This syncretic approach resonates with many seeking a harmonious blend of various spiritual and religious influences in their personal beliefs. Mahimā Dharma promotes the principles of non-violence and compassion as central to its religious doctrine. These values remain highly relevant in a world where conflicts and tensions often arise from religious and ideological differences. The movement's teachings inspire individuals and communities to embrace peaceful coexistence and dialogue as a means of conflict resolution. The reverence for nature and the emphasis on leading a simple and environmentally conscious life align with contemporary concerns about environmental sustainability. Mahimā Dharma's teachings promote responsible stewardship of the environment and serve as a reminder of the need to protect the natural world. Many Mahimā Dharma followers and organizations associated with the movement are actively involved in philanthropic and social welfare activities. Their contributions to education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation initiatives have a significant impact on the well-being of marginalized communities.

Mahimā Dharma's interactions with indigenous tribal communities have helped preserve and revitalize traditional tribal beliefs and practices. This collaborative approach promotes cultural diversity and ensures the preservation of indigenous knowledge and wisdom. Mahimā Dharma's contemporary relevance lies in its ability to inspire interfaith understanding, promote social justice, foster spiritual syncretism, and advocate for values such as non-violence, compassion, environmental awareness, and philanthropy. Its unique approach to spirituality, rooted in simplicity and humility, continues to make a meaningful impact on individuals and society in an ever-changing world, emphasizing the enduring significance of this religious movement.

Generally religion means a particular belief in God or Gods. It is not possible on the part of human beings to avoid religion all together. Ideas about religion may differ from person to person and each one may have his or her conception. As Max Muller says, "...to know the small source of a river" is very different from knowing the whole course of it".<sup>1</sup> Religion is at least as old as humanity itself and is still a living power, growing, evolving and taking different forms, all through the ages like a mighty river wending its course

through hills, valleys, plateaus, plains and flowing towards the sea. The Rig Veda says, '*ato dharmani dhārayam*'<sup>2</sup> and the Atharva Veda add, '*pr̥thivīm dharmeṇa dhṛtam*',<sup>3</sup> the Earth is upheld by Dharman. The word Dharma comes from the Sanskrit word '*dhṛ*' meaning to hold. It derives its name from its power to hold, to protect, and to keep the stability of societies of people. What is capable of holding together is 'dharma'. So the Mahabharata also says "*dharmā eba heto śānti dharmā rakṣati rakṣitaḥ*".<sup>4</sup> If we keep to religion, religion will protect us, if we transgress religion, it will destroy us.

In the second half of the 19th century, the Mahimā Dharma acted as a powerful force to counteract, on one hand, the movements of the Christian missionaries and on the other, the appeals of the anglicized Brahmo movement. It kindled new hopes in the minds of millions of Hindus who could aspire to find salvation in their own traditional system but in a simple way in which there was neither elaborate ritualism nor predominance of priests. Moreover, it did not recognize any distinction between caste, creed, colour and any such narrow social division of human beings. All men and women could find a place in Alekha Param Brahma. In a society dominated by evils of casteism, it rose head and shoulders above to give a serious blow to the existing system of the 19th century.

Mahimā Swami, also known as Mahimā Goswami and Alekha Swami founded a new religion which is still a popular living faith with an ever-growing number of followers in and outside Orissa. It is known as Mahimā Dharma or Alekha Dharma. The followers are called as Kumbhipatias.<sup>5</sup> Its founder was against idolatry and believed in one formless God. Mahimā Swami first appeared at Puri in 1826 and died at Joranda in the district of Dhenkanal in 1876. Mahimā Dharma was indigenous to the core and deeply filled with the Indian traditions. Its essential character is humanism. It prescribes the path of complete surrender to Alekha Brahman for salvation. This movement became so significant that it may be regarded as the harbinger of renaissance in Orissa. Mahimā Swami wrote nothing about his faith. In his religion the emphasis was on the code of conduct rather on the teachings. He instructed Govind Baba and Bhima Bhoi about the cardinal principles of his religion. The Bhajanamala of Bhima Bhoi reflects the philosophy of Mahimā faith. Biswanath Baba codified the rules, regulations and philosophy of Mahimā Dharma in his book Alekha Parama Brahma Darshanam and Mahimā Dharma Pratipadaka. Thus Mahimā Dharma contains some noble features. It interprets the deep Indian philosophy in such a simple manner that a common man can understand it easily. But there is a controversy among the scholars regarding its true character. Some scholars consider it as a modern form of Buddhism while a few others interpret it as a reformation of Hinduism.<sup>6</sup>

From the period of Ashok up to 16th century AD Buddhism was popular in Orissa. So the influence of Buddhism on Mahimā Dharma is accepted by some scholars. N.N Vasu pointed out that the Buddhists of Utkal styled themselves as Mahimādharmins.<sup>7</sup> Bhima Bhoi, one of the harbingers of Mahimā cult brings concept of Niṣkāma which is very similar with the Buddhist concept of Niṣkāma or non-Attachment towards worldly things. According to him an action done in a detached manner does not bind the individual because the agent gives up the sense of doership.

N.N. Vasu opines that Mahimā Swami was identical with Lord Buddha, because according to him Bhima Bhoi addressed Mahimā Swami as Prabuddha Swami or Buddha Swami. Bhima Bhoi writes, "That supreme being in the shape of human form incarnated as Buddha, preached the Alekha religion without any distinction".<sup>8</sup> The Mahimāites call their religion Mahimā Dharma as the Buddhists call their religion as Sudharma. Literally Sudharma means true religion. N.N. Vasu argues that Mahimā Dharma is one of the forms of Hīnayāna Buddhism because Mahimā cult is against idolatry like Hīnayāna Buddhism. It is marked that the rules Prescribed for the Sanyāsis of Mahimā Dharma are similar to those of Mahayana Buddhism. According to N.N.Vasu, the practices such as begging from door to door and eating in one vessel are inspired by Buddhism. But one difference about the Mahimāites is that they take Arnabhikṣā from one person only.

The Sūnya concept is another important ideology of this faith. The Sūnya of Mahimā cult is comparable to Brahma According to Eschman, "Mahimā Dharma takes up the Buddhist concept of emptiness (Sūnya) and identifies it with the Hindu conceptions of Parama Brahma and Ísvara Puruṣa, Sūnya Paramabramha is characterized more precisely with the concepts of Alekha, Nirguṇa, Nirākara, Nirañjana and Mahimā, all of which already appeared in the Medieval Oriya literature for describing Sūnya Brahma or as synonymous for him".<sup>9</sup> It is not correct to make Mahimā Dharma identical with Buddhism only on the basis of Sūnya. The concept of Sūnya can be traced back to Ṛgveda. This concept was known before the advent of Buddhism. Moreover the Mahimāites use the term Alekha to devote Sūnya Brahmam. Bhima Bhoi writes about the Sūnya Brahma and also Puruṣa Brahma. Except for the similarity of the word, the term Sūnya has different connotations in Buddhism and Mahimā Dharma.

According to Mayādhār Mansingh, Mahimā Dharma is corrupt form of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Mahimā Gosvāmī made his centre of missionary activity in the ex-princely states of Orissa where Buddhists are now residing. This cult was called as Satdharma like the Buddhism, the Satasāṅgha Goṣṭhī of Mahimā cult is similar with Buddhist Saṅgha and the saraṇa is the same as refuge of Buddhists. The use of ochre-colored garment and palm leaf fan of this cult is same with that of the Srilankan Buddhists. The prohibition of meal after sunset and non-killing of animals are also practiced in Buddhism. So Mansingh concludes that Mahimā Dharma is the echo of Buddhism.<sup>10</sup>

The basic ingredients of Mahimā philosophy are (1) Ahimsa (non-violence), (2) Brahmacharya (celibacy), (3) Satya (truth), (4) Abhedā (non-discrimination), (5) Tyāga (Sacrifice).<sup>11</sup> These cardinal principles are the main theme of many religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism. But Mahimā Dharma laid great stress on one concept, Abhedā (non-discrimination). It prescribes (non-discrimination) as a way for attainment of universal peace.

Some scholars argue that this religion is more identical with Hinduism. S.K. Mohanty holds the view that Mahimā Dharma is not a separate religion. It endeavors to reform the existing religions practices and beliefs of the Hindus.<sup>12</sup> AS Mahimā Swami accepts the authority of Vedas and Upanishads, it is undoubtedly a religious movement of Hindu fold.<sup>13</sup> K.B. Tripathy argues that Mahimā Swami Preached pure monotheism, identical with the doctrine of Vedānta or Upaniṣad.<sup>14</sup> Like the Veda and Upaniṣad, the Mahimāites claim about the Bisuddha Advaitavād or non-duality i.e. Alekha Param Brahma is one and without one. It has been the doctrine of many great philosophers like Śaṅkarācārya, Rāmānuja and others. This Satya Santana Dharma is Mahimā Dharma in a refined way which was called as Bisuddha Advaitavād.<sup>15</sup> Bhimabhoi Says, 'I will serve one religion, one name and one Brahman.'<sup>16</sup> It claims similarity between Mahimā Dharma and the Advaitavāda of Śaṅkarācārya.

The concepts of Alekha (indescribable) Nirguṇa (without attribute) and Nirākāra (formless) were largely influenced by the Brahman of Vedas and Upaniṣadas. Like the Upaniṣad the Mahimā cult beliefs that the Atman or self is unborn and eternal. Katha Upaniṣad describes the immortal quality of soul. Bhim Bhoi writes,

"He is not born from any womb.

He has no shape;

That Mahimā swami is the only Brahman.

And he propagates the Abadhuta religion".<sup>17</sup>

There are many similarities between the words of Gita and the Mahimā Literature. In Gītā, Lord Śrīkṛiṣṇa has given importance on the protection of the virtuous, for the destruction of evil doers, and for establishing Dharma on a firm footing". Bhima Bhoi says also, "when the people become psychologically

morbid, the Lord himself appears to save the afflicted devotees".<sup>18</sup> The law of Karma that 'as you sow so shall you reap' in the Gita is also same with Mahimā doctrine. So Bhim Bhoi says,

*"Pāpakarithile papaku bhuñjibe*

*Puṇya thile puṇyabhoga*

*Karma jāha thiba grahiriya hoiba Āpaṇā arijita phala".<sup>19</sup>*

The law of Karma supports to assume strict determinism with regard to human actions and their consequence.

The cosmology of Mahimā Dharma is a synthesis of two opposite beliefs that trends the dualism of Sankhya and monism of Vedanta. Mahimāites Mahimā Svāmī is responsible for the creation. Bhimabhoi in the Brahma Nirūpaṇa Gītā.<sup>20</sup> clearly describes how everything emanates from the Brahman Mahimā. According to him Mahimā and Parama Brahman are one and the same.<sup>21</sup> The Sāṅkhya philosophy says that the cosmos is a composite of 3 qualities i.e. Sattva, Raja, Tama which the Mahimā philosophy favours the same hypothesis."<sup>22</sup>

Like other traditional religions, Mahimā cult gives ideas about moral values and religious conduct which are very similar with traditional Hindu religion. The Mahimāites lead a very pure life.<sup>23</sup> Like all the Vedic rites and rituals the Mahimāites follow many code of conduct. Like the Jajna of Vedic form, Dehuri is an important aspect of Mahimā Dharma. They disinfect their body with cow dung. Their Saraṇa-Darśan before sunrise and sunset suggest that they are worshipper of sun God. But they do not worship him.

In Stuti Niṣedha Gītā Bhima Bhoi gives idea about Nirveda,<sup>24</sup> however it does not necessarily indicate the complete condemnation of Vedic scripture, but only its ritualistic portion. So Mahimā Dharma is a sect of Hinduism.

It is noticed that Mahimā Dharma has its root from the medieval Pañcasakhās tradition known as Vaishnavism. This cult does not follow the Sūnya philosophy directly from Buddhism but from Hindu tradition. Before the rise of Mahimā Dharma the Vaishnavas of Orissa had brought these ideas in medieval period. Like the Pañcasakhās tradition the Mahimāites believe that the salvation can be achieved through meditation and bhakti. They introduce the doctrine of 'Brahman Jñāna Bhakti' Yoga for the union of Yoga with the Sūnya Brahman. There is no difference between Alekha Brahma and individual. This is called Pinda Brahmana theory which is popularized by Pañcasakhās.

The main intention of Mahimā cult was to remove the social inequalities like casteism in the then society. Bhimabhoi says that there are only two castes- male and female, as everyone is the child of Alekha Brahma. This concept is found in Hinduism during the common feast among the members of different castes inside the Jagannath temple compound. Malikas of Panchasakha period gives idea about the future appearance of Kalkī Avatāra of Lord Jagannath. Like this, Bhima Bhoi also predicted the future which is popular as Bhimabhoi Malika.

Mahimā Dharma says about Bhakti as the means of salvation of Jiva, which is very similar with Vaishnavism. In Mahimā Dharma the liberated soul completely loses its identity in Alekha Param Brahma, but in Vaishnavism the liberation is possible by self-surrender. Like Panchasakha tradition, the Mahimāites are against the supremacy of the Brahmanas. Both these cult support Pinda Brahmanda and Guruvada.<sup>25</sup>

Though, the Mahimāites use the words Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, Sat Chakra, Olata Ujani, Nirvikalpa Samadhi, Phunkavandha, like the Vaishnavites, they do not follow rigorous yogic practices. They follow the Aṣṭāṅga Namaskāra (saraṇa) with body and mind for the realization of Brahma, which is very similar with Vedanta. In spite of all these similarities the Mahimāites do not worship Tulasī plant at home, which is dedicated to Lord Vishnu. They are strictly forbidden to touch Nirmālya which establishes a new tradition.

It is argued that, Mahimā cult does not completely oppose Jagannath cult but it is a reformation movement that turned against Jagannath worship. According to B.C. Majumdar, Bhimbhoi and his followers tried to burn the idol of Jagannath in 1881.<sup>26</sup> Eschman says, "This movement derives its criticism of Hindu tradition directly from the tradition itself, thus standing in an almost paradoxical two fold relation to the tradition which it accepts on one hand and reject on the other."<sup>27</sup> Through Bhimbhoi did not support image worship of Jagannath, yet indirectly he has interpreted Alekh Prabhu as Jagataranatha, Jagannath, Madanamohana etc.<sup>28</sup> He writes, "Mahimā Svāmī appeared in the age of Kali, you all surrender yourself to the Lord now. Submitting yourself, enjoy salvation and see in your own eyes the form of Buddha."<sup>29</sup> From these discussions it is known that Mahimā cult is not opposed to Jagannath cult. In this respect, Dhenkanal Magistrate (Babu Banamali Singh) mentions, "Mahimā Swami believed in the existence of Hindu Gods and Goddesses but to then, they are under his commands and they are bound to obey whatever he wished them to do".<sup>30</sup>

From the above discussion it is argued that the essence of Mahimā philosophy is similar with many ideas of other cults. Though similarities are found between Mahimā cult and other cults like Buddhism and Hinduism, yet some differences also arose between them. Firstly Mahimā cult like the Hīnayāna Buddhism does not believe in idolatry. The weakness of his argument is borne out by the fact that several other religious sects like Arya-Samaj, Brahma-Samāja, Bhakti movement also did not believe in idolatry. On this case it cannot be equated with Hinayana Buddhism. N.N.Vasu argues that the rules prescribed for the Sanyasi of Mahimādharmā are similar to Mahayana Buddhism. The scholars associate Mahimā cult with Buddhism on the basis of Sūnya concept but it is not correct because the concept of Sūnya can be traced back to Rig Veda. The exact place of Mahimāswami is yet unknown and the areas like Puri, Kapilas, Balasingha, Khuntuni, Dhenkanal, Joranda, Rairakhola where he propagated and appeared his Dharma do not reveal any Buddhist influence. It is argued that the Mahimāites practice the principles of carrying palm leaf fan like Buddhists but Mayadhara Manasingh argues that the using of fan is ever used by the villagers of Orissa. It is also said that though the rules of conduct of Mahimāites and ten Silas of Buddha are similar but the essential character of both is very different.

Here also some differences arise between Mahimā cult and Hinduism. The Mahimāites worship, the Alekha Parama Brahma who cannot be worshiped and they call him as Nirguṇa, Sūnya, Anānta, and Nirākāra. But the Hindus believe Him as Ívara who can be worshipped. Brahman cannot be worshipped but realized. He is one and non-dual. In another why it is said that Mahimā cult is similar with Saṅkarācārya is Visuddhā Advaitabada but the Mahimāites disagree with Shankar's theory of creation. Biswanathbaba<sup>31</sup> claims that the Satya Mahimā Dharma preached by Mahimā Swami is based on the term Visuddhā Advaitavād. But according to Bisvanāth Baba, Shankar has misrepresented Advaitism by introducing the Māyābada. By accepting Māyā or Avidyā as the cause of world creation, Śaṅkar forced to admit two principles i.e. Brahman and Avidya. The fundamental tenant of Advaitism becomes misconceived by declaring both Atman as Nirguṇa and World to be due to Avidyā. Thus the creation of world due to Mahimā will affect the sanctity of Advaitism.

The philosophy of Mahimā cult is not incompatible with the teachings of Vedas and Upaniṣadas. It does not refute their authenticity and authority but makes an attempt to reform Hinduism from within. Mahimā Gosāin tried to remove the remote possibilities of idol worship by declaring that worship is not due to anybody but due to the eternal Guru who is Parama Brahman. The Mahimāites concentrate directly on the non-dual ultimate reality.

## Conclusion

The above discussions reveal that Mahimā cult embraced different ideas from different sources. Still it can be concluded without any doubt that the cult has a philosophical background of its own. In order to bring a change in the down trodden society, Mahimā Swami, the founder of the faith, gave emphasis on noble ideas like purity of mind, good conduct, belief in a formless God and rejection of complicated rituals, rigidity of casteism and the supremacy of the Brahmins. Though these ideas may be traced back to Vedic foundation, yet it was the need of the time to purify the society on the above lines and Mahimā cult boldly did it. Due to its simplicity and popular principles, the cult has carved a niche in the hearts of the people in different parts of India. Mahimā Dharma, with its roots deeply embedded in Odisha, emerges as a unique religious movement that holds the potential to foster interfaith connections and promote tolerance and understanding among different faith communities. Through its syncretic elements and teachings emphasizing simplicity, humility, and non-discrimination, Mahimā Dharma offers valuable lessons for religious pluralism not only within India but on a global scale. By exploring the shared values, ethical principles, and historical interactions between Mahimā Dharma and other major religions, this comprehensive study illuminates the path towards a more harmonious coexistence of diverse religious traditions and a deeper appreciation of India's rich religious tapestry. It is our hope that this research will serve as a catalyst for further exploration and dialogue in the realm of interfaith studies, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and interconnected world.

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