

TRACING FOOTPRINTS: THE SPREAD OF MAHIMA DHARMA BEYOND ODISHA

Avinash Sahu

Research Scholar, Department of History, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack

ABSTRACT

Mahima Dharma, defined by strict monotheism, rejection of idol worship, and opposition to the caste hierarchy, originated in the Garhjat states of Odisha in the mid-nineteenth century. This study examines the expansion of Mahima Dharma beyond its place of origin and regional boundaries, as well as attempts to locate its expansion in the historical and sociological contingencies. Although frequently classified as a localised subaltern sect, the research draws on colonial administrative records and ethnographic literature to trace the movement's substantial spread into Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Assam, and Jharkhand. The analysis explores how theological doctrines, monastic itinerancy (*paribrajaka*), and the migration of labourers to tea plantations and industrial centres functioned as key mechanisms facilitating the dissemination of Mahima Dharma beyond Odisha. Mahima Dharma, often referred to as the *Alekha* faith, has developed a trans-regional presence, particularly among tribal and rural communities, thereby influencing the socio-religious dynamics of eastern India and transcending Odisha's linguistic boundaries.

KEYWORDS : Mahima Dharma, Religious Itinerancy, Alekh, Labour Migration, Ollek

INTRODUCTION:

In the 19th century, India witnessed the emergence of various social religious movements such as the Ramakrishna Mission Society, Brahma Samaj, and Arya Samaj, within a social religious landscape marked by monotheism, opposition to caste hierarchy, and rejection of idol worship. In this context, the land of the Garhjat states of Odisha witnessed the emergence of a new sect, Mahima Dharma, founded by Mahima Swami (also known as Mahima Gosain) in the mid-19th century. It emerged not merely as a sect but as a counter-hegemonic social force. This faith propagated the worship of *Alekh Param Brahma*—the formless, attributeless, and indescribable Supreme Reality (Eschmann, 1978).

Address for correspondence :

Avinash Sahu, Research Scholar,
Department of History, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack
Email: Prof.avinashsahu@gmail.com
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6656-1296>

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Received	Reviewed	Accepted	Published
28-Jan.-2026	26-Mar-2026	15-May-2026	01-June-2026

Volume	Issue	June	ISSN
No. 8	No. 1	2026	2583-1852(P), 2584-0878(O)

How to Cite this Article: Sahu, Avinash.; Tracing Footprints: The spread of Mahima Dharma beyond Odisha. THE THIRD VOICE REALITY AND VISION. 2026. Vol No-8. Issue No-1. June. Pp: 42-47, DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20543254>

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Available online at :
thirdvoice.voiceforvoiceless.in

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20543254>
Article No - TVRV00111

The historiography of Indian religious movements is dominated by the reformist narratives of the Brahmo Samaj in Bengal or the Arya Samaj in the north. The Mahima Dharma is often categorised as a regional subaltern social protest movement of Odisha, but its rigorous examination of demographic base reveals a movement with a profoundly trans-regional character. This study examines the thesis that Mahima Dharma transcended the political and linguistic boundaries of Odisha, resulting in the formation of significant diasporic communities in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Assam, and Jharkhand. By analysing the roles of saints and the migration patterns of subaltern communities, the paper argues that Mahima Dharma served as a spiritual vehicle for marginalized groups, adapting to local social and cultural contexts while maintaining its core theological principles. Specifically, this review article aims to examine how the doctrines of this religion, *Paribrajaka* and strict rules, and labour migration played as important factors to disseminate the Mahima religion beyond the geographical boundary of Odisha.

This paper is a review article based on existing academic literature. It adopts a multidisciplinary approach that integrates historical, theological, and anthropological methodologies. The study synthesises secondary scholarship such as edited-volume chapters on Mahima Dharma's doctrine, social critique, and institutional practices, ethnographic studies with select primary sources like Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Analytically, the paper treats "mobility" not as background context but as a mechanism linking theology, institutions, and socio-economic displacement. First, it reads doctrine as a portability-enabler: if the divine is formless and not bound to a consecrated idol or temple geography, the religion can reproduce with minimal material infrastructure. Second, it treats monastic discipline—especially the *ekaratri* (one night) principle and alms restrictions—as an institutional design that generates circulation, repeated contact, and boundary-crossing. Third, it treats labour migration as a channel that produces concentrated, vulnerable, and socially reconstituting communities in which a portable religious form can become a resource for solidarity, dignity, and moral order.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Mahima Dharma emerged in Odisha during the mid-19th century as a strong protest against Brahmanic and Royal control of religion, as well as the statues and idols of deities that governed the lives of followers through excessive caste-based discrimination (Banerjee-Dube,

2001; Eschmann, 1978). Caste separation and security of wealth through caste prestige had become very rigid by the time of the establishment of the Mahima Swami (i.e., Mahima Gosain), who, after learning asceticism at the Kapilas Hills (Dhenkanal), began to disseminate his teachings regarding the *satya dharma* (True Path) through expeditions and the establishment of *Tungis* (i.e., congregational areas) (Banerjee-Dube, 2001). The foundational beliefs of Mahima Dharmic thought held that the Absolute is *Alekh* (limitless) or *Sunya Param Brahma* (ineffable), accessible to all individuals without the need for the intermediary roles of priests, statues, or temples. This doctrine has also been referred to as *Visuddha Advaita* (Pure Non-Dualism) and emphasised the means of attaining salvation through devotion and surrender to a *Nirguna* (formless) and *Nirakara* (unfathomable) reality, rather than through obtaining merit from Brahmanical rites, travel to pilgrimage locations, or caste rank (Deo, 2015). One of the most distinct features of Mahima Dharma is that the doctrine of practice reflects the doctrine of the theory. Mahima ascetics accepted cooked food from the poor while refusing to accept food from the wealthy or elite (i.e., Brahmins and Rajahs).

An additional characteristic of Mahima Dharma is that the practice of worship of the deity has changed from the costly temple economies of old to the simplicity of collective worship within humble settings (Banerjee-Dube, 2001; Guzy, 2002). The use of Bhima Bhoi's vernacular poetry has translated the beliefs of *Alekh/Sunya* metaphysics into a vision of social equality with respect to suffering and the liberation of oppressed peoples from the control of their masters, which also served to help solidify the popularity of the Mahima Dharma movement (Mahapatra, 2017; Mangharam, 2011).

MECHANISMS OF EXPANSION

DOCTRINAL PORTABILITY

The rapid spread of Mahima Dharma can be attributed to its philosophy and practice of creating an easily portable form of religion. By identifying *Sunya* (nullity or empty space) and by rejecting the need for any form of idolatry, the practice of worship became more accessible and could be reproduced with little material support. The fundamental teachings of Mahima Dharma, grounded in *Visuddha Advaita*, present the Supreme Being as *nirguna* (without particular qualities or characteristics) and *nirakara* (without any specific form). This perspective allowed worshippers to be less dependent on the

mediation of institutions to access Ultimate Reality (Banerjee- Dube, 2001).

In addition, Mahima Dharma emphasised that all humanity is in the family of God; as such, it provided an alternative for those traditionally considered “Untouchables” as well as tribally marginalised groups (Dalit and Adivasi) in the Traditional Hindu social system (Deo, 2015).

ROLE OF ITINERANT MONKS

The growth of Mahima Dharma beyond its original geographic area was also founded on one of its major ascetic principles, *paribrajaka* (wandering monks). The Mahima sannyasis, who comprised the *Balkanadhari* (Bark Dwearing Monastic Order) and the *Kaupinadhari* (Loincloth Wearing Monastic Order), adhered to strict rules that prohibited them from settling or acquiring material wealth. These rules perpetuated the continual circulation of sannyasis (Eschmann, 1978; Guzy, 2002). One of the major guidelines governing the discipline of sannyasis was the *ekaratri* rule, which mandated that monastic practitioners (sannyasis) must never sleep in the same place for more than one night, and that a sannyasi could not eat twice from the same household (Guzy, 2002). The guidelines regarding alms further enhanced monastic mobility and independence from the established power structures; *sannyasas* could not accept *bhiksha* (alms) from a raja (king), a Brahman, or a *dhoba* (washerman), and twice from a single household (Banerjee-Dube, 2001; Proceedings of Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1882). Mahima Svami created temporary places of worship (known as “*tungis*”), used them to attract followers, destroyed them, and left followers to keep the faith alive in the community (Banerjee-Dube, 2001).

LABOUR MIGRATION DYNAMICS

Like the itinerant monks, Mahima Dharma spread due to the migration related to colonial labour in Eastern and North-Eastern India. From the mid-19th century, tea plantations in Assam and the Dooars were built with tribal labourers from Odisha and Chotanagpur, often through coercion, thus creating a “Tea Garden Diaspora” (Barman, 2021; Pati, 2020). The isolation of the plantations, along with the management’s discipline, made faith a necessary ingredient in the workers’ ability to survive and to build community. Philosophy of Mahima Dharma’s aniconic and no-cost nature provided the foundation for workable practices of non-casteism (Eschmann, 1978; Guzy, 2002; Pati, 2020). In many cases, the migration to the industrial belts of Chotanagpur

has helped to sustain the portable moral community among many migrants.

REGIONAL ILLUSTRATIONS

ANDHRA PRADESH (OLLEK DHARMA)

In the tribal agency areas of Northern Andhra Pradesh, particularly in **Srikakulam and Vizianagaram** districts, Mahima Dharma underwent a process of localisation. Here, the faith is widely known as “*Ollek Dharma*” (Venkata Rao, 1999). The Mahendragiri hills, situated in the Gajapati district of Odisha but historically influential in the Srikakulam region of Andhra Pradesh, served as a crucial node. The region is inhabited by the **Saora and Kandha tribes**. Since Mahima Gosain’s early activities involved the conversion of a Savara (Saora) named Sadananda at Kapilas (Nath, 1977), the faith had an early entry into the Saora cosmology. The movement spread southward along the Eastern Ghats through these tribal corridors. Ethnographic evidence indicates that tribal villages in the **Araku and Paderu** regions adopted Mahima Dharma as a means of social mobility. By adopting the “clean” practices of the Mahima cult, such as vegetarianism and teetotalism, and rejecting the Brahminical caste hierarchy, these communities established a distinct social identity (Venkata Rao, 2019). Scholarly research has identified the presence of *Alekh Gurumais* (female shamans) associated with the Mahima tradition (Guzy, 2012). This phenomenon illustrates the integration of the abstract concept of *Alekh Brahma* with indigenous healing systems and spirit possession practices. The participation of these mediums enabled the acceptance of Mahima Dharma among non-literate tribal populations in the Andhra agency areas by offering a version of the faith that addressed immediate concerns related to health and sorcery.

The **Alekh Mahima Mandir** in Panthulunga (Koraput, near the border region of Andhra Pradesh) acts as a critical spiritual anchor for this region. Although geographically in Odisha, its location near the Andhra border makes it a pilgrimage site for Telugu-speaking devotees who cross over for the *Magha Mela* and other festivities. The presence of Mahima devotees in Srikakulam and Vizianagaram is characterised by the *Alekh* ascetics who wander these districts, identifiable by their saffron or bark garments and *Badi* (large palm-leaf umbrella).

CHHATTISGARH (ASHRAMS AND BHIMA BHOI)

The expansion of Mahima Dharma into Chhattisgarh constitutes the most significant success of the movement beyond Odisha. Cultural and geographical continuity between Western Odisha and the Chhattisgarh plains enabled a seamless transmission of religious ideas. The proximity of these regions, along with shared tribal demographic patterns, enabled the transmission of religious ideas through direct contact and gradual population drift.

This westward spread was institutionally anchored by the **Khaliapali Ashram**, near Sonapur, established by the poet-saint **Bhima Bhoi** following Mahima Swami's death in 1876. Bhima Bhoi's residence at Khaliapali from 1877 until his death in 1895 transformed the ashram into a major centre of Mahima activity. His extensive poetic and philosophical output—especially *Stuti Chintamani* and numerous bhajans—circulated widely as vernacular religious literature, resonating deeply with tribal and low-caste communities across Central India.

The intensity of Mahima Dharma's presence in this western belt is evident in the 1 March 1881 attack on the Jagannath Temple, carried out by a group of Mahima Dharmis (Kumbhipatias) mobilised from Sambalpur, at a time when Raipur functioned as the headquarters of the Sambalpur Division. The group was led by Dasaram (also referred to as Dasharam), a follower from a village in Sambalpur, who claimed to have received divine instruction to burn the image of Jagannath (Banerjee-Dube, 2001; Pati, 2009). The Mahima Dharma movement began as a radical rejection of the caste system, and idol worship, and garnered significant interest and support from tribal populations and people of lower castes residing in western Odisha and the surrounding areas of central India

Consequently, it stretches from coastal Odisha to locations in the hinterlands and regions adjacent to the current borders of Odisha and parts of present-day Chhattisgarh, including significant cities like Raipur, which form much of the upper half of the state of Chhattisgarh today.

The Mahima Dharma movement, within contemporary Chhattisgarh, has been institutionalised via an interconnected network of ashrams (spiritual retreats) and temples, which function as both places of worship and places for community gathering. Some examples of such ashrams/temples include the **Alekh Mahima Mandir** at **Saraipali** (Raigarh District), as well as the Mahima Ashram at Rampela (Bilaspur District). These institutions function not merely as monastic residences

but as centres of *niti* (ritual practice), where *Brahma Muhurta* prayers and *sarana* (ritual surrender) are performed daily, sustaining orthodox Mahima traditions beyond their Odia linguistic homeland.

WEST BENGAL AND ASSAM

In West Bengal and Assam, Mahima Dharma expanded in tandem with the colonization of the tea industry and the labour displacement associated with this plantation economy. In addition to the labour market demands of the tea plantation industry in Assam and the Dooars of northern Bengal, a great many of the plantation labourers were sourced from the original tribal areas of Orissa. Migrant labour brought not only their own traditions but also the *Tungis* of Mahima Dharma to the remoteness of the tea estates (Pati, 2020).

The expansion of Mahima Dharma across the region can largely be attributed to the extensive travels of **Brahmabhadhuta Biswanath Baba** throughout Orissa and neighbouring states (Nath, 1977). Baba attempted to gain the Mahima Dharma's legitimacy by publishing treatises to redefine the Mahima Dharma from an irrelevant 'tribal cult' to an established philosophical tradition (*Visuddha Advaita*), thus providing the opportunity for educated members of society, such as those in cities like Cuttack, Raipur, and Kolkata, to accept the Mahima Dharma as an acceptable belief system (Nath, 1977)

In West Bengal, records indicate the presence of an **Alekh Mahima Ashramat Borsole**, Midnapore, which suggests a stable monastic or congregational community rather than solely itinerant preaching. In Assam, the **Pertabghur Alekh Mahima Mandir** in Sonitpur district, located within a tea-estate area, serves as a centre for preserving Odia identity and the egalitarian ethos of the faith. These shrines provide spiritual dignity to workers who face exploitative conditions far from their native regions

IN JHARKHAND

The industrial development of the Chotanagpur plateau, particularly the emergence of Jamshedpur as a major industrial centre following the establishment of TISCO (1907), generated massive labour demand drawing upon Odia and other Eastern Indian populations.

According to Mathews Arreparamil, **Bokudi Dharam** represents an adaptation of Mahima Dharma that became popular among the Tantis and Jharuas, lower-caste groups in the Singhbhum region near Raj Kharsawan

railway station. Emerging around 1930, this movement employs religious texts written in Oriya. Adherents greet each other with the phrase “Olek Mahima” and sing praises of “*Olek Bhagawan*”. The faith is centred on the worship of a single deity named ‘Olek’ and explicitly rejects traditional animal sacrifices. Adherents follow strict practices, including vegetarianism, which prohibits the consumption of fish and meat, and conduct prayers and ‘*stutisorono*’ (meditation) in secrecy, often during nighttime hours (Arreparamil, 1993).

ANALYSIS OF MAHIMA’ SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION BEYOND ODISHA

Mahima Dharma should be understood as a trans-regional socio-religious movement rather than a localised sect; the presence beyond Odisha is proof of this. Doctrines such as the worship of *Param Brahma*, opposition to caste hierarchy, and rejection of temple-centered rituals involving priests become mechanisms for mobility in other regions. Itinerant Monks operated as mechanisms of diffusion, reinforced by strict disciplines such as the *ekratri* and alms rules, which prevented stable settlement and dependence on elites. Labour migration served as a moral community for the spread of tea plantations & industrial regions. Across regions, Mahima Dharma appealed to tribals, Dalits, and other marginalised groups due to its anti-caste ethics and its low-cost worship, which offered dignity and an alternative to Brahmanical mediation. The paper shows patterned localisation without loss of core principles and practices (such as *Ollekdharam* & *Bokudidharam*). Institutional anchors (*tungis*, *mandirs*, *ashrams*, and literature) stabilized the faith beyond its geographical boundaries.

RESULTS

As a result of this study, it can be concluded that Mahima Dharma should not be seen as a local subaltern movement; it is very much a product of Odisha’s monotheistic, aniconic belief system and has a history of rejecting caste hierarchies and the mediating role of priests and religious authorities. There are two main avenues to understand how Mahima Dharma grew and spread beyond Odisha. First, the disciplined itinerant life of monks led to numerous connections being established between the various areas where the monks travelled. Secondly, as Indian society industrialised and people became economically displaced, many former workers took their beliefs with them to their new homes. Mahima Dharma essentially required little material assistance to establish itself because its practice was based on formless

perceptions of God rather than on physical objects (an idol) or place-based worship (a temple). Changing regional names, for example, “Ollek”, suggests how the movement has adapted, but nonetheless remained true to its core values of equality and the simple forms of worship. This research contributes to the historiography of subaltern religious movements by presenting that marginalized communities played an active role in constructing alternative spiritual frameworks that addressed caste discrimination, economic displacement, and cultural alienation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Umakanta Mishra, Department of History, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, for his suggestions and revisions, which strengthened this paper.

FUNDING

The author received no financial support for this article.

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