In roughly one hundred and forty years of its existence, Mahima Dharma has undergone mutations as it has evolved and taken shape as a sect. Initiated by Mahima Swami in the 1860s in the tributary states of Orissa, this faith has moved from being a loose body of adherents of a radical, mobile preceptor to a well-coordinated institutionalized religious order with definite rituals and ceremonies and prescribed codes of conduct. This paper will use the words and works of two key figures of Mahima Dharma – Bhima Bhoi and Biswanath Baba – as a prism to understand, on the one hand, the interface between the works of the two leaders and their apprehension by the followers, and, on the other, between their practices and the shifts in emphases within Mahima Dharma.

Marginality and militancy characterized Mahima Dharma in its initial phase with marginality contributing to militancy. Appearing in Puri, Mahima Swami toured the areas under direct British administration before deciding on Kapilas in the tributary state of Dhenkanal as his place of meditation. The far-flung territories of the gadjats (tributary states under Oriya rulers) were also the regions where he moved and preached the new faith from 1862 until his death in 1875/76.¹ His message was simple yet significant: worship of stone and wooden images of gods was of no avail; the real object of veneration was a formless, all-powerful, indescribable (alekh) Absolute who had created the world out of his mahima (radiance/gory). Anyone could have access to the Absolute through pure devotion. There was no need for priests and pilgrimage; hierarchy among human beings was artificial and superfluous. The founder’s disregard for property, authority, establishment and discrimination was articulated in his practices. He was
constantly on the move; he neither constructed any permanent structure as his place of residence nor acquired property. He slept on bare ground, ate only one meal a day got as *bhiksha* in a broken earthen pot, and forbade his disciples to accept anything but cooked rice as alms, rooting out thereby any tendency to accumulate. Cooked rice was to be accepted from every household without regard for caste; only the Brahman, the Raja, the barber and the washerman were denied the privilege of granting alms to the ascetics of Mahima Dharma. Mahima Swami nominated no successor and left no written records of his own. Instead he endowed Bhima Bhoi, his tribal devotee, with the eye of knowledge and the gift of poetry and entrusted him with the task of propagation of the faith through his inspired utterances. Bhima Bhoi played a crucial role in the two decades that spanned the death of the founder and his own death in 1895.

Bhima Bhoi is a colourful figure, an iconoclastic poet difficult to be defined only in relation to the dictates of a single faith. Believed to have been born blind to poor Khond parents, Bhima had a difficult childhood and never received any formal education. He had, however, recourse to ‘traditional’ modes of education and imbibed a great deal by listening to the readings, recitations and interpretations of the epics and popular religious texts at communal gatherings in the village. *Bhajans* (devotional songs) and songs recounting the love of Radha and Krishna opened for him the doors to Vaishnava and *bhakti* philosophy. The influence of various religious traditions apprehended aurally and orally, crucially shaped Bhima Bhoi’s thought and ideas. Throughout his life he remained rooted in the rich oral tradition of Orissa, a tradition he drew upon and enriched.

By stressing Bhima Bhoi’s lack of formal education and his rootedness in oral tradition, I do not intend to reinforce the dubious dichotomy between orality and writing that translates as illiteracy and literacy, with writing being accorded a privileged and an elevated position. Rather,
my purpose is to underscore the jumbled-up nature of reading and writing, orality and literacy, that occasions the creation of new texts in the process of dissemination through joint renderings. This is particularly true of Bhima Bhoi, a poet devotee who has, over the course of the twentieth century, risen to the status of a saint and who, like the Panchasakhas (Five Friends) – five medieval mystics – has had texts composed in his name.

A blend of the oral and the written inhered in the composition and diffusion of Bhima Bhoi’s works. Bhima Bhoi, the ardent poet, sang out his praises to the Lord. Four scribes wrote down these inspired utterances, which were then sung at common gatherings of the devotees. The contents of the numerous stutis, janans, and bhajans, inflected with the intensity of personal communication with the Master of the world who was also the poet’s own Guru, made Bhima Bhoi and his works immensely accessible and variously appropriable. Reflecting an ingenious mix of the precepts of Mahima Swami and different religious-philosophical traditions of Orissa, these works spoke of an alekh (indescribable), all-pervading, nirguna (beyond attributes) Absolute – the Creator the world – as the only object of devotion. Pure devotion made this distant and difficult-to-comprehend Supreme attainable by all. High philosophy thus got transformed into an effortless message of hope, that at once discarded social discrimination and dismissed idol worship and the mediation of Brahmans between the deity and his devotees. Bhima Bhoi stayed with the followers and ‘readers’ all along, at times speaking passionately of his own woes and sorrows, trials and triumphs as a devotee, at others outlining and guiding other devotees along the path of nirveda sadhana (meditation/worship not outlined in the Vedas) which, if followed properly and sincerely, was to lead to salvation. What is more, Bhima Bhoi impressed on the followers the urgency of taking recourse to the true faith by speaking repeatedly about the perils of the evil era of kali, that had cast an iron grip over the world. This
preponderance of the everyday concept-metaphor of *kaliyuga* aligned Bhima Bhoi’s works to the ever-present and ever-popular *mailkas* and made them amenable to diverse perceptions and understandings. *Malikas*, apocryphal texts that speak of the vileness of *kaliyuga* and its eventual destruction at the hands of an incarnation who is to appear, have been a part of the Oriya popular (vaishnavite) tradition since the sixteenth century. Comprising prophesies of a vague and general nature and lacking a strong authorial voice, *malikas* get worked and reworked as they make their appearance in different times of stress. At the same time, their authorship is ascribed to the Panchasakhas, a fact that lends credibility to the prophesies as it demonstrates the hold of the medieval mystics over Oriya popular imagination. Bhima Bhoi, whose works bore a close resemblance to that of the Panchasakhas, and whose simple message of salvation in *kaliyuga* through devotion to the Supreme held a wide appeal for subordinate groups of men and women, became a true successor of the Five Friends in the veneration he commanded.

Bhima Bhoi’s colourful life added to the mystique and charisma that surrounded him. After Mahima Swami’s death, the poet cut off his links with ascetics who sought to keep the faith together by constructing a memorial for the Guru at Joranda in Dhenkanal. Bhima set up his own *ashrama* at Khalipali in Sonepur, cohabited with more than one woman, and went beyond his preceptor by allowing women to join the monastic order. If this incensed the renouncers at Joranda and caused confusion among some of his followers, it also generated a stock of legends and stories about the enigmatic poet, who came to take the place of the founder among the adherents of western Orissa. Stories that had begun to gather about his birth, his deep devotion leading to his initiation into Mahima Dharma by Mahima Swami, increased in number as the reverence offered to him in life got transformed into legends soon after his death. Bhima Bhoi’s elevation to the status of a saint began.
The vernacular was the first to record this. In 1908 a senior official of the court of Sonepur wrote an essay entitled “Bhima Bhoi’s acquisition of knowledge”. In parenthesis he called it ‘a legend’. Published in the Oriya literary magazine Mukur in 1908, the essay wanted to make Bhima Bhoi and ‘his religion’ known to readers. In a very interesting turn of events, Bhima Bhoi’s fall into the well, an incident widely believed to have occurred during Mahima Swami’s time, indeed a marker of Bhima Bhoi’s devotion that induced Mahima Swami to initiate him, was stated to have happened after the disappearance of Mahima Swami. Distressed by the pitiful state of the faith, a distraught Bhima called out to the formless Alekh. He heard a voice near the well asking Bhima to hold his hand and climb out of the well to avoid death. But the thought of death was not what troubled the earnest devotee. Indeed, death was much less painful than the pang of witnessing the erasure of the name of Alekh from the world. The number of Alekh’s devotees was painfully small and it was dwindling day by day. There was no written text to help people concentrate on the worship of Alekh and gain peace of mind. “Were all the efforts of the Guru going to be in vain?” Hearing Bhima Bhoi’s words the voice asked him why he, a fervent follower, instead of making the effort was blaming others. But for Bhima Bhoi it was an impossible task to carry out. He was ignorant, with no knowledge of the letters, and blind. How could he write about the glories of Alekh that the Guru had preached that was difficult for even learned men to understand? At that, the owner of the voice lifted Bhima Bhoi out of the well, set him on the right path and addressed him as the ‘guru of the bhaktas [devotees].’ The eye of knowledge was conferred of Bhima. The precepts of ‘Mahima Das’ and the essence of his faith were to blossom in Bhima’s heart in the form of ‘prakruta’ songs. He needed only to recite, scribes were to commit them to writing. Mahima Dharma would gain fame and popularity through Bhima who would spend the last part of his life serving the feet of the Lord.
The ‘legend’ published in the Oriya magazine added distinct emphases to the tale of Bhima Bhoi and Mahima Dharma. The absence of written texts was taken to be the main cause for the crisis of the faith. Bhima Bhoi was the person selected to deal with the crisis. He was granted the eye of knowledge by dint of which the essence of the teachings of Mahima Das were to burst forth from him in the form of ‘prakruta’ songs. Indicating a shift from the oral to the written the essay nevertheless underscored the spontaneity of Bhima Bhoi’s creations. It also brought into relief the importance Bhima Bhoi had come to acquire among the followers of western Orissa. Within a few years of his death he had become the key figure in the propagation of Mahima Dharma, the real ‘guru of the bhaktas’. Mahima Das had preached it no doubt, but it was Bhima Bhoi who saved the faith from extinction, and aided the interpretation and proliferation of its message in a way as to become its real leader.

This essay was soon followed by N. N. Vasu’s influential text in English that sought to establish Mahima Dharma as a neo-Buddhist sect and Bhima Bhoi as its main proponent who in 1881 had lead the march of some lay followers of Mahima Dharma to the temple of Jagannath in Puri to destroy the idols. Official reports of the incident of 1881 do not, in any way, associate Bhima Bhoi with the ‘attack’.

Present day adherents of Mahima Dharma vigorously deny any connection of Bhima Bhoi with the incident. At the same time, Vasu’s text, written within fifteen years of Bhima Bhoi’s death, bears testimony not only to the poet’s hold on the minds of the adherents, but also to the way his works had been perceived and apprehended. The link between Bhima Bhoi’s declaration that Jagannath had left Puri to become Mahima Swami’s first disciple and the long march of a small group of anonymous men and women from western Orissa to the temple to destroy the lifeless image ensconced there and demonstrate that Jagannath indeed had left Puri, is after all, not tenuous. The dramatic incident revealed at once the spread
and reach of Bhima Bhoi’s compositions and the force of particular readings that armed
ordinary, marginal men and women with the strength to carry out an audacious and almost
unimaginable task. A divine command communicated through a dream convinced them of the
necessity of the difficult task they had to undertake to counter the setback of the faith caused by
the death of the founder.

The force, appeal and amenability of Bhima Bhoi’s works was highlighted again in the
first half of the twentieth century when malikas in the name of Bhima Bhoi made their
appearance. Mahima Dharma had survived the death of Mahima Swami through the presence
of the powerful personality of Bhima Bhoi and also through the construction of a memorial for
the Guru at Joranda. In the 1920s the faith was threatened by dissension among the ascetics at the
helm of affairs in Joranda. The crisis within the faith coincided with a very enthusiastic phase of
the nationalist struggle against colonial rule under the leadership of Gandhi.

Stories about the ‘Mahatma’ blended with the teachings of Bhima Bhoi to give rise to apocryphal texts that
prophesied the reappearance of Mahima Swami as Gandhi and Kalki to root out the forces of kali
(the British) and re-establish satya dharma. An ingenious amalgam of myth and history, orality
and writing, linear and cyclical notions of time, these malikas brought together gods and saints,
legendary heroes and political leaders as soldiers of the Absolute to fight the mahabharata (epic)
war of kaliyuga and bring to an end the era of evil by annihilating its forces, the resourceful,
manipulative and exploitative British, as well as the ‘fake’ followers of Mahima Dharma who
were threatening the true faith with schism.

Bhima Bhoi did not compose the malikas that mention twentieth century personalities and
also vary significantly in style and content from his works. But they seize upon an important
component of the creations of Bhima Bhoi – the perils of the pervasive kaliyuga, and the call to
all human beings to seek shelter in Mahima Dharma without delay to avoid destruction. Combining the concern of the humanist poet-devotee with the prophecies of apocryphal texts, these *malikas* at once urged the adherents of Mahima Dharma to remain steadfast unto their faith and provided them with hope by promising a bright future. The crisis in the faith and the difficulties of the present were to be resolved by the reappearance of Mahima Swami.

The appearance of *malikas* over four decades after the incident of 1881 underscore the continued accessibility and efficacy of Bhima Bhoi’s precepts and promulgations. The presence of thoughts and ideas drawn from popular religious traditions of Orissa and the use of the quotidian metaphor of *kaliyuga*, made it easy for these difficult compositions to be easily apprehended and diversely deployed. The fact that they were first spoken, then written down and further disseminated through collective singing, lent them with a unique force. They got reworked through different readings as they spread. *Bhima Bhoi became the poet-philosopher of ordinary, subordinate groups of men and women, whose message – responsive to different appropriations – remained a source of solace, support and strength for the marginal people. In spite of going beyond his guru’s teachings Bhima Bhoi maintained the preceptor’s emphases in important ways.*

Mahima Swami had shunned property, authority, establishment. He had moved away from Puri, the centre of religious-political power, and preached his faith in the remote areas of the tributary states among the poor and common folk who predominantly came from the lower castes and tribes. Indeed, the Swami had refused to take alms from brahmans, rajas, barbers and washermen, displaying his disdain for the repositories of power and their human instruments for the exercise of control. His constant mobility complemented by total detachment were powerful statements against establishment. *It is not surprising then, that Mahima Swami left no written*
records of his own and entrusted the task to a blind, tribal person without any formal education, whom he graced both with the eye of knowledge and with the gift of poetry. The blind devotee’s inspired utterances were to be noted down, but they were to spread not through writing, but through collective reading and performance.

It was this stress on the oral, the everyday, the ordinary, and the peripheral, and the challenge and interrogation inherent in them, that Bhima Bhoi’s compositions preserved and carried forward. Although he set-up his own *ashrama* and settled there permanently, and produced compositions that contained difficult philosophical concepts, Bhima Bhoi did not get ‘sedentarized’. The combination of oral forms and written modes in the construction and dissemination of his works, the radical force of his message, and the surfeit of meanings and understandings it generated, kept Bhima Bhoi very close to the lay disciples of western Orissa, who turned to him again and again for comfort and consolation, encouragement and action. The location of Bhima Bhoi’s *ashrama* in Khaliapali, Sonepur at the edge of western Orissa, and its geographical distance both from Joranda in Dhenkanal, which over the twentieth century emerged as the headquarters of Mahima Dharma, and from the seats of ritual-political power, served to underline Bhima Bhoi’s distance from the centre and establishment governed by rigid rules, and his closeness to the border. Despite being canonized by the oriya literati in the twentieth century, Bhima Bhoi has defied categorization. He has retained an inherent sense of the unexpected and the unbound that has preserved his hold over popular imagination and let his works be drawn upon in distinct and diverse contexts.

Let us turn to Biswanath Baba, a leading ascetic who dominated the affairs of Mahima Dharma at Joranda from the late 1920s to the early 1990s. To a large extent, Biswanath Baba, a rigorous renouncer in the mould of the founder, typifies the shift in Mahima Dharma. Like
Bhima Bhoi, he took on the important task of ensuring the continuity of the faith and brought about significant changes in the process. Biswanath came to prominence at a critical moment in the life of Mahima Dharma: when the faith was threatened by dissension and division.

Mahima Swami had initiated two groups of ascetics into the monastic order. He had given *kumbhipat* (the bark of the kumbhi tree, which is what he wore) to some and *kaupin* (waist-cloth) to others while initiating them. Although there is some indication that there was occasional conflict between the wearers of *balkal* (bark) and those of *kaupin*, it did not assume any significant proportion during the lifetime of the founder. The relative position of the two groups did not become a major issue. The crisis produced by the death of the deified guru aggravated tensions, but the more pressing problem of the survival of the faith made the two groups of ascetics work together first to construct the *samadhi* (memorial) of the preceptor and then to turn it into the repository of the guru’s authority. The memorial was intended to make up for the absence of a nominated successor or a universally accepted leader.

It was precisely the importance acquired by the *samadhi* over time that brought the two groups of renouncers again into conflict. The wearers of *balkal* (Balkaldharis), by virtue of the fact that the founder wore *balkal* and made it the garb of his first disciple, claimed superiority over the wearers of *kaupin* (Kaupindharis) and sought to monopolize control over the conduct of services and ceremonies at the *samadhi*, the *gadi* (seat) of the faith. The Kaupindharis challenged this claim by arguing that the Guru, who was opposed to all kinds of discrimination, had never introduced any gradation among his own disciples. The disagreement reached a climax as Nanda Baba, a prominent Balkaldhari promoted fifty-six of his disciples from the status of the wearers of *kaupin* to the wearers of *balkal*, underlining the inferior status of Kaupindharis. The act was said to have been based on the command of the Guru. But it was challenged by another eminent
Balkaldhari sanyasi, Krupasindhu Baba, who ordered the new wearers of balkal to move out of the inner compound of the gadi.

This was the beginning of a long story of friction and conflict that eventually involved the mediation of law and turned the two groups of ascetics into contending litigants and permanent opponents, a process I have discussed elsewhere.15 Here I mention this only to trace the immediate background of Biswanath’s rise to prominence within Mahima Dharma. Still in his twenties, he was the most outstanding of the fifty-six sanyasis granted balkal by Nanda Baba. Born to Mahima Dharmi parents, Biswanath had come into the fold of the faith at an young age. He had also made his mark as a scholar. He was the best suited to lead the new group threatened with expulsion by a direct disciple of Mahima Swami. He performed his job well. Krupasindhu was forced to leave Joranda and go on a long tour. At the same time, as an person devoted to the faith, the young ascetic was concerned not only with consolidating his position and that of the newly ordained Balkaldharis, but also the danger posed to the faith by disharmony among the sanyasis. It became more severe once Krupasindhu returned to Joranda and formed the nucleus of a rival order, as several disaffected Kaupindhrari sanyasis gathered around him. The new leaders of the Balkaldharis adopted several measures to counter the threat to the faith: they sought to widen the social base of the following of Mahima Dharma among the urban middle classes; they moved to the law court to settle the dispute; and tried to give their claim to be the sole interpreters of the Guru’s teachings a solid base through a display of their scholarship. Biswanath Baba again took the lead in this regard. He had acquired a reputation as a scholar among the renouncers. What was required was a demonstration of that scholarship. The Guru himself directed the new leader. Biswanath Baba’s Mahima Dharma Pratipadaka owed its publication ‘to the grace of Mahima Mahaprabhu.’16
Mahima Dharma Pratipadaka, as the name suggests, was geared towards an exposition of the teachings of Mahima Swami and the main tenets of the faith. The exposition addressed scholars and people of intellect – the ones capable of judging the efficacy of the faith by testing it against reason and truth. Consequently, the proof of each statement was sought to be corroborated by citations from scriptures and texts of Indian philosophy. Mahima Swami, described as prabuddha avatar and iswar purush, was shown to have the special features of avatars and iswar purush outlined in Hindu scriptures. Quotations from the sastras were profusely used, citations were followed by translations. The author’s mastery of Sanskrit was displayed along with his understanding of the sastras. The discussion of the founder’s swarup was followed by an eclectic interpretation of the terms mahima and dharma. The next six chapters elaborated the teachings of the Dharma and their implications for the various categories of bhakta. Brahma upasana (worship of the indescribable Absolute) was declared to be the highest form of worship and the primary principle of the Dharma. Prayers and supplication to gods and goddesses and their idols, it was argued with the help of the sastras, were inferior modes of worship.

The initiates in the path of Brahma upasana (worship) were divided into two categories – the gruhis (lay disciples) and abadhusashram sanyasis (renouncers who will eventually become abadhutas, the highest form of being). Sanyasis again were of two orders, lower and higher, the apara and the para. Apara sanyasis rose to the status of para sanyasis only when they attained sel-realization. This realization dawned – very much in the Advaita Vedantic tradition of Sankaracharya – with the realization of ‘I am Brahma’. It was the culmination of Brahma-jnana-bhakti yoga. The apara sanyasis wore kaupin, the para sanyasis had the distinction of wearing balkal. The spiritually higher status of the Balkaldharis was established as a fact. There
was no hint of any tussle, of the battle lines that stood clearly drawn. This was hardly surprising. Biswanath Baba could not afford any ambivalence about the matter. The Balkaldharis’ credentials as the leaders of the faith were at stake.

The Pratipadaka was followed by Satya Mahima Dharmara Itihasa, the first formal, official history of the sect. Composed partly as a response to the law court’s requirement of written records as evidence, the Itihasa provided the followers of Mahima Dharma with an ‘authentic’ past in the mode of western rational historiography and granted the Guru the dignity of chronology and temporality. At the same time, it freely drew upon puranic traditions of ‘itihasa’ to establish the divinity of the preceptor. Mahima Swami was situated within tradition but beyond history. Extending the concerns of the Pratipadaka, the Itihasa discussed the self-willed leela (sport) of the divine Guru in a chronological sequence, explained the essence of the faith he preached, codified his teachings and demarcated the norms and rules he had laid down for the different categories of followers. Gradation among the sanyasis became an established fact, and the right of Balkaldharis to conduct the services at the gadi, and guide all adherents of the faith became a norm set by the founder. The attempts of Kaupindharis to create a rival samaj was decried as an act that went against the teachings of Mahima Swami. Through all this, Mahima Dharma was brought close to high Hinduism and declared to be sanatan Hindu Dharma, pristine Hinduism as it had existed prior to the advent of kaliyuga.

The Pratipadaka, Itihasa and several others that followed not only made Biswanath Baba the leader of the Balkaldharis, the group that commanded affairs at Joranda, they also reflected and perpetrated mutations and shifts in emphases within Mahima Dharma. Indeed, it is through these changes set in motion by processes in the twentieth century, that Mahima Dharma evolved as a sect, an institutionalized religious order. I turn to these shifts and draw out their implications...
through a comparison between Bhima Bhoi and Biswanath Baba, at the final section of the essay.

Bhima Bhoi and Biswanath Baba took on the leadership of the faith at moments of crisis. Both explained and interpreted the teachings of Mahima Swami for the benefit of the followers. They also agreed on the basic tenets – belief in the one and only formless, indescribable Absolute as the sole redeemer of humanity, abandoning of the worship of gods and goddesses and rejection of the rules of caste – which find a prominent place in the writings of Bhima Bhoi and Biswanath Baba. Both were ordained by the preceptor for the job. This is where the similarities end.

To begin with, Bhima Bhoi, a poor tribal without formal education, is widely believed by Mahima Dharmis to have been entrusted with the task of propagation of the faith by Mahima Swami. The claim is made on behalf of Biswanath Baba by his middle-class sympathisers. Bhima Bhoi, as stated before, was a radical, passionate poet who defied categorization. Emotion is the key feature of his numerous stutis, janans and bhajans that evoke a sense of complete devotion and total surrender, of utter abandon of an ardent devotee pouring his heart out to his master. There is no display of scholarship, no conscious effort to pose as the interpreter of the master’s teachings. Sung out spontaneously by the poet, these devotional poems and songs circulated orally through joint singings of followers who were primarily pre-literate. The emotive lyrical compositions drew upon a common stock of knowledge current in popular religious traditions, and lent themselves to distinct apprehensions and reworking. As his message was variously drawn upon, the poet’s life became a source of legends. Bhima Bhoi, the poet-philosopher became a saint in spite of leading the life of a householder. In life and legend, he remained on the threshold, leaning toward the marginal. Himself blessed by the Guru, the poet continued to guide subordinate groups of men and women through joy and pain, happiness and
In Biswanath Baba we encounter an adherent of an entirely different kind. Separated from Bhima Bhoi by a generation, he did not have the privilege of being initiated by Mahima Swami. He was, however, born in a family of followers of the faith, and was attracted to the monastic order at a very early age. Biswanath, we are informed in the foreword of the *Pratipadaka*, wanted to renounce the world when he was only eight years old, but was refused permission by his parents. Disappointed, he persisted in his dedicated learning of Hindu scriptures till the age of eleven when he was struck by a painful disease that could not be cured. Biswanath told his parents that the cure lay in his renunciation of the world. His parents were forced to grant him permission.\textsuperscript{22} We have here the makings of a new kind of leader – at once a devoted ascetic and a dedicated scholar. At the same time, his life had the touch of the magical. His initiation into the monastic order was divinely ordained. The blessing and direction of the divine master were to accompany all his subsequent ventures, most importantly the publication of his texts. By composing these written texts Biswanath Baba provided a signal service to his faith. He answered to the need felt sorely both by the self-realized ascetics of Mahima Dharma, and its sympathizers among the Oriya literati, of the absence of authoritative treatises that would make ‘the movement meaningful, provide an intellectual base and maintain stable continuity of the principles’.\textsuperscript{23}

Biswanath Baba’s scholarship was informed by a privileging of the written over the oral. He was no ardent poet, schooled in the informal modes of ‘collective’ education, but a serious scholar in the classical mould whose command of Sanskrit was a first step toward his mastery of Hindu scriptures. And it was this command and mastery that his texts displayed. The table of contents of *Mahima Dharma Pratipadaka* carried a list of 185 *srutis, sastras* and other works
cited in the text, works that supplemented, substantiated and justified Biswanath Baba’s arguments at each step by providing the crucial pramana, evidence held so important by schools of Indian philosophy. The text, of course, is not meant for joint readings by pre-literate readers. It is aimed at people of intellect, capable of reading and reflecting in private, of using their power of reasoning to judge the truth of the statements in accordance with pramana. Pratipadaka highlights the venture of a detached scholar guiding formally educated followers along the path of salvation, laying down standards they should strive to attain, and inscribing the milestones on the path of self-realization. Brahma-jñana-bhakti replaces Bhima Bhoi’s bhakti; ascetics are ranked in accordance with the spiritual standard they have attained, promotion comes as a reward for the attainment of spiritual superiority, gradation becomes an integral part of the monastic order.

Bhima Bhoi and Biswanath Baba attended to different needs and performed different functions within Mahima Dharma. Joranda, the centre from its inception dominated by ascetics, held no attraction for Bhima Bhoi, a non-conformist poet of tribal descent who took to the life of a householder. Bhima Bhoi cut himself off from Mahimagadi, associated himself with the margin and became a very powerful force among ordinary lay followers, who respected him as their divine master and ‘read’ and used his works to great advantage. Biswanath Baba directed all his efforts to provide the faith with a strong centre. A learned scholar in Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy, he firmly believed in the efficacy of written texts and the necessity of spreading the faith among the middle classes, particularly those residing in Cuttack and Bhubaneswar, seats of intellectual and political power. His written texts were intended to impress, to teach by establishing the intellectual superiority of the author. Srutis and sastras were drawn upon profusely, at once to substantiate Biswanth’s arguments and to highlight his mastery of Hindu
scriptures. Needless to say, this reliance on scriptures stood in marked contrast to Bhima Bhoi’s writings which criticised, ridiculed and dismissed the societal norms and rules laid down in the *srutis* and *sastras* and instead advocated *nirveda sadhana*. Biswanath, it bears pointing out, did not prescribe the reading of *sastras* as a means to achieve self-realisation. Indeed, knowledge acquired from the *sastras* was declared to be useless once *atmajñan* (self-knowledge) and *Brahmañjan* (knowledge of Brahma) had been achieved. But the scriptures had to be studied, if only to realize their uselessness. *Jñan*, knowledge thus came to constitute a necessary and at times the more important companion of *bhakti*, devotion in the attainment of salvation.

Biswanath Baba, the rigid ascetic and the rigorous intellectual, symbolized the centre, the institution and the establishment. It is not surprising then that it was mainly through his efforts and those of his compatriots that a *sthabar*, static memorial replaced a *jangam*, mobile founder as the nucleus of power, that the observance of rules and norms became the crucial mode of preserving order. There was a move back from the *vana*, forest to the *ksetra*, field/society, from the liminal to the clear, from the border to the centre. 25 The precedence accorded to the written over the oral, and to reason over emotion was a corollary to this. These shifts underwrote the evolution of Mahima Dharma as an institutionalised religious order in the twentieth century, a faith that rearticulated its relationship with Hinduism. Biswanath Baba the scholar and the teacher, in the course of providing a reasoned explication of his faith, aligned it to high Hinduism, eventually calling it *Visuddha Advaita* – pure non-dualism with ‘supporting evidence from Vedanta and other Shrutisastras’. 26

Biswanath Baba died in 1992. His death was mentioned in Oriya newspapers, memorial meetings were held in Cuttack, commemorative volumes published. 27 His life did not give rise to legends, but to written texts – biographies and expositions of his life and philosophy. 28
position of the head of the organizing committee of the Dharma, left vacant by the Baba’s death, was filled by four Balkaldhari ascetics, some dissenting sub-groups sorted out their differences with the main group. The affairs of the Balkaldharis at Joranda continue to be guided by the standards laid down by Biswanath Baba, who is spoken of reverently by renouncers and householders. Mahima Dharma and Mahima Dharmis take recourse to the works of Bhima Bhoi and Biswanath Baba, move between and negotiate the contrary pulls to hold onto their faith and at times, assert their independence and distinct identity. Mahima Dharma lives on as a faith that symbolizes dissent and resistance, incorporation and restraint.

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Notes

*I thank the editors of this volume, Johannes Beltz in particular, for inviting me to the conference on Mahima Dharma held in Bhubaneswar in 2001 and, on my failure to attend the conference, generously asking me to contribute a paper to the volume. I thank him also for intellectual feedback and support extended over e-mail for the past three years.

1 An exploration of the life and teachings of Mahima Swami and an analysis of their implications are contained in Ishita Banerjee-Dube, ‘Issues of Faith, Enactments of Contest: The Founding of Mahima Dharma in Nineteenth Century Orissa’, in Hermann Kulke and Burkhard Schnepel (eds.), *Jagannath Revisited. Studying Society, Religion and the State in Orissa* (Delhi: Manohar,
The fact of Bima Bhoi’s blindness has increasingly been challenged since the 1970s, specially by scholars from western Orissa but there is general agreement that Bima Bhoi had had no formal education. See the several works of Bhagirathi Nepak, for instance, *Bhima Bhoi: Chinta, Chetana, Jiban* (Bhubaneswar; Publication Committee, 1973); *Odiya Sahityara Tini Bhima* (Bhubaneswar: Bhagirath Prakashan, 1976); *Bhima Bhoi: The Adivasi Poet Philosopher* (Bhubaneswar; Publication Committee, 1987); *Bhima Bhoi: His Life and Works* (Lachhipur: Bhima Bhoi Sanskrutik Sansad, 1998); and the article of Debendra Kumar Dash cited below.

The huge corpus of bhajans – *Bhajanmala*, the autobiographical *Stuti Chintamoni*, and *Nirveda Sadhana* are among the most important and popular of Bima Bhoi’s numerous compositions.

This is evident in the formal and informal interviews I have conducted with many lay disciples who live in or near Khaliapali and the Sonepur-Barpali region. The current fieldwork of Johannes Beltz confirms the picture.


Reports on the incident and on the faith in general written by police officers and local officials of the colonial government like the Tehsildars of Angul and Banki and the Manager of Dhenkanal, in response to the detailed enquiry ordered by the Commissioner of Orissa on behalf of the Government of Bengal, were incorporated in the *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of
Bengal 1882, as a long feature entitled ‘On the Origin and Growth of the Sect of Hindu Dissenters who Profess to be the Followers of Alekh’.


9 Nireveda Sadhana, one of Bhima Bhoi’s most well-known compositions, identifies Govinda Das, the first initiate of Mahima Swami with Jagannath, and declares that Jagannath had left Puri to become the Swami’s disciple to purge himself of the impurities incurred in his several incarnations. This belief and identification persist till today. Bhima Bhoi, Nirveda Sadhana, chapter 1.

10 I found translations of two malikas of Bhima Bhoi in the Eschmann Nachlass at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg. The Oriya text of the longer of the two malikas, Bhima Bhoi Malika ba Padmakalpa, was also among the Eschmann papers, which I later came cross in Orissa. I have not been able to locate the other text.


It is difficult to ascertain the exact date of this incident but the reading of materials, discussions with adherents of Mahima Dharma, biographical details of Biswanath Baba’s life that can be culled, court records and the dates of Biswanath Baba’s publications all indicate that it most certainly happened in the 1920s. This is also the time when the *malikas* of Bhima Bhoi appeared.


*ibid.*

Biswanath Baba, *Satya Mahima Dharmara Itihasa* (Cuttack, 1935).

See BanerjeeDube, Taming Traditions, pp. 106-109 for a detailed and critical analysis of the *Itihasa*.

Ghanashyam Das, foreword to Biswanath Baba, *Mahima Dharma Pratipadaka*.


Satrughna Nath, *Introduction*, in Biswanath Baba, *Philosophy of Mahima Dharma*. (Cuttack: Satya Mahima Dharmalochana Samiti, year not mentioned). This was a published version of the speech Biswanath Baba delivered at a Religious Conference held at Puri in 1974. A detailed discussion of the philosophy of Mahima Dharma is contained in Biswanath Baba’s *magnum opus* written with the help of Ananta Charan Baba – the two volumes of *Sarva Veda Vedanta Saratattva Siromni, Alekh Parambrahma Darsanam* (Purvardha Bhubaneswar: Utkal University, 1968 and Uttarardha Cuttack: Satya Mahima Dhramalochana Samity, 1973). The first volume was translated into English as *The Philosophy of Mahima Dharma (Philosophy of Unalloyed Non-Dual Supreme Being)* in 1987 (Cuttack: Mahima Dharmalochana Samiti).

The Mahima Dharmalochana Parishad of the Alekhtungi in Chandnichowk, Cuttack, where Biswanath Baba lived most of the time, brought out a special issue entitled *Samarpan*, in honour of Biswanath Baba.

Satrughna Nath, *Mahima Bhakti Rasamruta* (Mahima Dharmlochana Parishad, Cuttack, 1992 provides details of Biswanath Baba’s life, and dwells at length on his philosophy and efforts to spread the faith. I also located a hand-written biography of Biswanath Baba among the
Eschmann Papers in Heidelberg. According to Satrughna Nath, it never got the ‘Baba’s’ permission to be published. This is one indication of the very strict codes Biswanth kept for himself.