



# Vision of Santhakabi Bhima Bhoi: A 19<sup>th</sup> Century Saint-Poet on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

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**Abstract:** This paper highlights the modernity of Bhima Bhoi's thoughts on women and their upliftment, and it shows how his thoughts were ahead of his time. This study examines how scholarly research on women's empowerment has evolved over the past two decades by conducting a comprehensive literature analysis. The extant literature has paid limited attention to examining the breadth and depth of work and has not reflected on how the research has evolved over the last two decades and shaped the area of women's empowerment. Women empowerment is major focus of the developing nation like India. The fundamental point and objective of the women empowerment is developing the individual just as society, with emphasis of social change of the women which help in building the society to make it modernized and gender equality. It also discusses some of the principal philosophical ideas in his poem on gender equality and women empowerment. This article makes an attempt to reveal mysticism as visualized by Bhima Bhoi in his poetry. The author has analyzed and examined the poetry of Bhima Bhoi and traced out the concept ingrained in them with respect to women and their emancipation.

**Keywords:** Santhakabi Bhima Bhoi, Gender equality, Women empowerment, and Mahima Dharma

**Introduction: -**

Over the past few decades, there have been numerous significant alterations to the status of women in India. From ancient times, when women enjoyed the same status as men, to the darkest days of the Middle Ages, and to the advocacy for equal rights by numerous reformers. One of them is Santhakabi Bhima Bhoi. He was among the few selected male social reformers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who appeared as a ray of hope for the oppressed women. He was the great social reformer of that time who raised his voice against the dominance of males over females. There is no iota of doubt that Indian women have experienced a turbulent past. But, in modern India, women have adorned High-ranking positions, such as those of president, prime minister, speaker of the Lok Sabha, leader of the opposition, etc. They have gained recognition in modern society. India's current president is also a woman. And the credit for inspiring women to participate in different social activities goes to Bhima Bhoi. With his writings, he has inspired the masses to fight for their rights. He engaged women in social activism in Odisha. He worked for everyone's freedom in addition to the nation's civil emancipation.

**Status of Women in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: -**

The profile of female literacy in 19th-century Odisha is not entirely positive. It paints a less-than-ideal image of female literacy. They were subjected to numerous limitations that had an impact on their social standing. In a society where conservatism, casteism, female infanticide, child marriage, sati, polygamy, illiteracy, and other social evils were deeply ingrained, women were totally subordinated to their males. Bhima Bhoi was a glimmer of hope during this crucial period of hegemony and power, appearing as a blessing to the innumerable hapless common people who were blindfolded. Bhima Bhoi strove to improve the socioeconomic status of Odia women, particularly those who lived in rural areas. Bhima Bhoi was the one who spoke to all women in the cosmos, not just those in a certain area. His efforts undoubtedly gave social reform a fresh flavor. Even if Bhima Bhoi supported women's empowerment ten years ago, it is still relevant and will continue to be so in the future.

**Bhima Bhoi's perception of women: -**

The fresh perspective of women gradually came to be recognized with the rise of Bhima Bhoi. The profound spiritual notion that respects for one's mother is among the finest kinds of worship is expressed in the verses of his compositions. According to Mahima philosophy, the mother is the first manifestation of the divine; she is the source of nurture, compassion, and life. A person learns humility, purity of heart, and a sacred vision for all beings when they are able to genuinely bow at their mother's feet. Such a person experiences such spiritual elevation that he is shielded even during pralaya, the cosmic breakdown. This protection is given by Lord Alekha, the formless absolute. The devotee achieves freedom and is set free from the never-ending cycle of life and death as a result of this purity and submission.

For Bhima,

ମାତାର ପାଦକୁ ଯେ ଭଜି ପାରିଛି ପ୍ରଳୟରୁ ହେଲାପାର  
ଅଲେଖ ପୁରୁଷ କରନ୍ତି ତାହାକୁ ଜନ୍ମ ମରଣରୁ ଉଦ୍ଧାର (Stuti Chintamani, 88.5)

**Denotation:***“Whoever is able to worship the feet of his own mother**He is saved from the universal dissolution**The Lord Alekha saves him**From the birth and death of the world.”*

Again, he states,

ସ୍ତ୍ରୀଟି ମାତା ଅଟେ ଜାଣ । ପୁରୁଷ ପୁତ୍ର ଯେ ପ୍ରମାଣ । (Shruti Nisedha Gita, 14)

**Denotation:** *“Know that woman is the mother; Man, himself is her son—that is the truth”*

Bhima Bhoi gave respect to the women and made them feel respected in society. This phrase promotes equality and gratitude, teaching that a woman's duty as a mother is sacred and fundamental to all mankind, and it delivers a profound message of love and veneration for women, reminding us that every man is born of a woman—his mother.

Bhima also states that through the doctrine of Mahima genuine spiritual devotion cleanses our perception of reality. A devotee's perspective shifts as he truly follows Mahima, a path of detachment and purity; he starts to see every woman with the same reverence and respect that he has for his own mother. Any worldly appeal, desire, or emotional attachment to them spontaneously vanishes as a result of this higher perception.

When someone is perceived as a “Mother”, the mind is unable to hold onto illusion or desire; those emotions naturally fade. This is accomplished via the transformation that commitment provides, not by coercion. In the end, it is the Lord who cleanses the devotee's heart and eliminates these internal attachments, enabling him to overcome worldly temptations and lead a clear and pure spiritual life.

Bhima Bhoi intended women to be treated with reverence as mothers and daughters, free from exploitation, discrimination, and objectification. One will not view other women with lustful eyes if he regards them like his own mother. He gave the women's lives wings and released them from constraints. He presented women as the epitome of purity. In Stuti Chintamani, he writes,

“ମହିମା ଭଜିଲେ ପର ଯୁବତୀକି ବୋଲିବ ଏ ମୋର ମାତା ।  
ମାତା ବୋଲନ୍ତେ ମୋହ ମାୟା ନ ଲାଗେ ଆପେ ଛଡ଼ାନ୍ତି କରତା ।” (Stuti Chintamani, 93.10 )

**Denotation:** *“If you worship Mahima you will regard,**Other's women as your own mother.**Once you call mother, the delusion and attachment towards her vanishes.**The Lord himself removes the same.”*

The profound spiritual notion that respect for one's mother is among the finest kinds of worship is expressed in these verses. According to Mahima philosophy, the mother is the first manifestation of the divine; she is the source of nurture, compassion, and life. A person learns humility, purity of heart, and a sacred vision for all beings when they can genuinely bow at their mother's feet. Such a person experiences such spiritual

elevation that he is shielded even during pralaya, the cosmic breakdown. This protection is given by Lord Alekha, the formless absolute. The devotee achieves freedom and is set free from the never-ending cycle of life and death as a result of this purity and submission.

### **Bhima Bhoi's voice against the social evils:**

It is evident from the writings of Bhima Bhoi that he was a reformist and revolutionary thinker who constantly educated the credulous masses and mentally prepared them to combat social problems. Due to his blindness and poverty, he was constantly considerate of the plight of the underprivileged.

He writes,

“ପ୍ରାଣୀଙ୍କ କଷଣ ଭେଦୁଅଛି ମନ ଜୀବନକୁ ମୋର ବାଧେ ।

ଭୀମ ଅରକ୍ଷିତ କରି ଦଣ୍ଡବତ କାରଣ ମାଗୁଛି ପାଦେ ।” (Stuti Chintamani, 26.20)

**Denotation:** *“The distress of the souls penetrates my heart and gives pains to my life.*

*The unprotected Bhima makes obeisance lying prostrate on the ground asking for solution under your feet.”*

These phrases convey the intense empathy and spiritual suffering of a devotee. The speaker's heart cannot stay unaffected because he feels the anguish of all suffering souls so deeply that it becomes his own. He refers to himself as "unprotected Bhima," signifying humility and surrender, after realizing his own weakness and limits. He demonstrates his dedication and submission by lying completely on the ground. In this humble position, he acknowledges that divine grace—rather than human strength—is the ultimate remedy for the world's suffering and looks exclusively to the Lord for direction, comfort, and divine intervention.

### **Bhima Bhoi's view on Gender Equality: -**

Bhima Bhoi has been a fervent supporter of equality. Bhima Bhoi envisioned an equal world devoid of gender discrimination and casteism. A man and a woman are the same entity. Mahima Dharma does not discriminate against initiates based on their position in society, whether it be high or low. In his writings, Santhakabi Bhima Bhoi described this feature in ample detail.

“ସ୍ତ୍ରୀ ପୁରୁଷ ଦୁହିଁଙ୍କ ଗଢ଼ିଅଛି ଯୋଡ଼ିଏ ସ୍ୱରୂପ ଦେଖ

ଦ୍ୱିତୀୟ ଜାତିରୁ ତିନି ଜାତି ନାହିଁ ସୁଜନେ କର ବିବେକ (Stuti Chintamani, 70.14)

**Denotation:** *“The Lord has created woman and man*

*These two forms you can see.*

*Except these two castes of man and woman, there is no third caste,*

*Oh, good people! you exercise your conscience.”*

This verse highlights the fundamental equality and oneness of men and women. According to the poet, there is no intrinsic "third caste" or category that exists outside of these two forms from which all humans are sprung. This calls into question human-imposed social or ritualistic barriers and serves as a reminder that distinctions such as caste or hierarchy are artificial and meaningless.

Again, he says;

ଯେସନେକ ଜଳ ପବନର ଭେଦ ନାହିଁ ।

ପୁରୁଷ ଯେତିକି ଯିବ ସ୍ତ୍ରୀ ଯିବ ତହିଁ । (Brahma Nirupana Gita, 302)

**Denotation:** “Just as there is no difference between water and air, wherever man may go, woman too shall go there.”

The principle of equality and inseparability between men and women is eloquently expressed in this verse. Men and women are equal and destined to share the same spiritual journey and destiny, just as the elements of nature, such as water and air, cohabit without discrimination. It teaches that neither is better nor worse in the divine order of creation; rather, both are necessary, interconnected, and unified in every aspect of life.

Bhima Bhoi attempts to defend the idea that a Mahima Dharma adherent must think of themselves as God's creation and offspring. In an effort to promote social integration and unity by dismantling social divisions based on caste, creed, religion, knowledge and wisdom, beauty and background, wealth and occupations, etc., he counseled people to seek refuge with Param Brahma, rejecting the narrow-minded perspective based on caste and community, high class and low class.

Gender inequality is a major problem that prevails in Indian society. Even now, prejudice based on gender persists. According to Bhima Bhoi, since both men and women are products of Brahma, they should have equal rights and benefits. He has expressed concern for the issues that affect all living things on the planet, especially women. The women's misery is intolerable to him. His main goal was to improve the circumstances of women. His intense feelings and emotions find expression in poetry. As he put it;

ଦୁଇ ରୂପ ଦୁଇ ଜାତି ରଞ୍ଜିତ ସେ ଜାଣି, ଏକ ବ୍ରହ୍ମରୁ ଦ୍ଵିତୀୟ ହୋଇଲେ ଜନମ । (Brahma Nirupana Gita, 302)

**Denotations:** “From the sacred womb arose both castes alike; man and woman together sustain the three worlds.”

କାହିଁ ମୁଁ ଲୁଚିବି କେମନ୍ତେ ବଢ଼ିବି ପଳାଇବି କେଉଁପଥେ

ଜଗତ କଷଣ କେତେ ମୁଁ ସହିବି ବିପତ୍ତି ପଡ଼ିବ ଯେତେ । (Stuti Chintamani, 25.1)

**Denotation:** “Where can I hide myself and how shall I live, which way shall I run away. How much worldly pains can I endure, so much of dangers lying ahead.”

ପ୍ରାଣୀଙ୍କ ଆରତ ଦୁଃଖ ଅପ୍ରମିତ ଦେଖୁ ଦେଖୁ କିବା ସହୁ

ମୋ ଜୀବନ ପଛେ ନକେଁ ପଡ଼ିଥାଉ ଜଗତ ଉଦ୍ଧାର ହେଉ । (Stuti Chintamani, 27.7)

**Denotation:** “Oh Lord! It is unbearable to see the immense sufferings of the human beings and all other creatures of the world. Let my life be in eternal hell in lieu of saving the world from misery.”

These lines express the ultimate selflessness and compassion. The overwhelming pain of all beings overwhelms the poet. He has such profound empathy that he is prepared to forgo his own salvation to promote world peace and emancipation. It embodies the spirit of selfless love and universal compassion, a concept frequently seen in major spiritual traditions where one prays for the well-being of all beings rather than their own.

**Bhima Bhoi's View on the Women as Spiritual Leaders: -**

In the past, women were not allowed to enter the temple and do the rituals and worship of high-caste Hindus. But they got admitted to the temples and got access to worship Mahima Dharma. While preaching Mahima Dharma, he initiated many women into the fold of this Dharma. This shows the liberal and progressive attitude of Bhima Bhoi towards women. In the 92.1 Boli of Stuti Chintamani, he affirms that

“ଛତିଶ କୁଳ ବାଉନ ଯେ ପାଟକ ଯେ ଅଛ ସ୍ତ୍ରୀ ପୁରୁଷ ।

ଉଚ୍ଚ ନୀଚ ବାରିଣ ନ କରୁ ନାମରେ ଶରଣ ପଶ ।”

**Denotation:** “The thirty-six families and fifty-six subcastes

*Whoever men and women are there.*

*Without making any difference between high and low castes, you take refuge in the name of the Lord.”*

All men, but particularly women, who were excluded from high caste Hindu rituals and worship as well as those to whom temple entry was barred, had access to Mahima Dharma. He also encouraged women to become spiritual leaders. He allowed his wife, Annapurna to participate in spiritual activities and take the leadership role.

Bhima Bhoi treated his wife equally in society. He didn't marry Annapurna to keep her confined to household duties; instead, he gave her the position and honour of being worshipped as "Maa." According to Religion, Law, and Power author Ishita Banerji Dube, "Annapurna came to share the honours with Bhima Bhoi as Maa Annapurna symbolising the equality given to women by Bhima Bhoi in the path of meditation and salvation." According to Sitakant Mahapatra, the Khaliapali Ashram, the most important Centre of Mahima Dharma was established in 1877 under the supervision of Maa Annapurna.

He did more than just advocate for the treatment of women in society; he also demonstrated it. It is because of Bhima Bhoi that women were able to discover their voice in a society where men predominated. Mahima Gosain, the founder of Mahima Dharma also permitted women to participate, but they had their own separate Sunya Mandirs. They were not allowed to live together with men-folks (Pradhan,).

**Bhima Bhoi's View on Women's Education: -**

Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence that are necessary to participate fully in the developmental process. Though Bhima Bhoi did not talk about the education of women directly yet he encouraged the education of women. Labanyabati, the daughter of Bhima Bhoi and Annapurna is the living proof. It is very interesting to know that unlike Bhima Bhoi and Annapurna, Labanyabati was also extraordinarily gifted and informed in a variety of fields. She was knowledgeable in medical studies and "Lata Manjari" was one of her books on ayurveda (Sahoo S.,2019). The book carries a detailed description of various medicinal plants which is written in Sanskrit language.

Bhima Bhoi was also of the view that women possess all kinds of knowledge. He goes to the extent of saying that it is only when women impart knowledge to men that an ideal world will be created. He makes a powerful and compelling statement when he writes in Stuti Chintamani, Boli 24.18 that:



“ନିଜା ଗର୍ବମାନ ନ ରହିବ ଟାଣ କରୁଥିବେ ଏକ ଭାବ ।  
ପୁରୁଷକୁ ସ୍ତ୍ରୀ ଜ୍ଞାନ ବୁଝାଇବେ ସତ୍ୟଯୁଗ ଲେଉଟିବ ।”

**Denotation:** “*Blaming others, pride, and ego will lose harshness. All will have one mind. The women will teach knowledge to the men, the age of Truth will return.*”

He understands the significance of women in the culture of the time. Women shouldn't be treated like trash and only be seen as sexual objects. They are not as illiterate as the males think; they are people of immense knowledge. Only when men pay attention to and accept the knowledge that women share will the Age of Truth (Satyayuga) return. Men won't abandon their "slander and ego" unless they pay attention to the women. She has the power to influence a man's aggressive tendencies. She has the capacity to fill the heart of man with love.

**Conclusion: -**

Bhima Bhoi appeared as the ray of hope for the women of Odisha in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the women were going through many restrictions. He worked tirelessly to uplift and upgrade the condition of the oppressed, especially women. He has fought and raised a voice for women's rights, broke the notion that women belong to four walls only, and reduced gender discrimination.

Bhima Bhoi explicitly acknowledges in the eleventh chapter of the Brahma Nirupama Gita that there is no differentiation between men and women, that the Param Brahma created male and female as the two major jatis, and that there is no third jati in this vast cosmos. Because of their service to the Guru, men and women are referred to as dasa and dasi, respectively. The lady could venture as far as a man does because there is no difference between water and air (Rabindra Ku. Behuria, 2018,19). Bhima Bhoi also included women in Mahima cult (Mahanand, 2022). Needless to say, his poetry undoubtedly contributed significantly to the dissemination of his ideas and spiritual practices.

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