

Radical Religious Poetry in Colonial Orissa

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Bhīma Bhoi, Orissa's 19th century saint poet of Mahima Dharma, in articulating a rationality of radical social equality and a theory of secular rationalism in colonial India, lays the foundations for an indigenous comparative modernity. The ingenious ways in which he does this through the aesthetic form of his poetry enables us to decolonise indigenous thinkers, and give them back their ability to articulate their own identities. The material they provide helps us change the terms of the conversation about modernity. It allows us to see a vast array of local narratives from all corners of the world conflicting, intersecting or adding to one another, all contributing to the modernity we live in today.

In March 1881, an incident took place in the city of Puri, Orissa, in eastern India, that shook brahminical religious authorities, as well as the colonial establishment that buttressed them,¹ to the core.² A group of 15 followers of Mahima Dharma, an ascetic religious movement founded in the late 19th century in Orissa, marched to Puri and stormed its famous Jagannath temple compound. The press and police reports of the time make it clear that the Mahima Dharmis, in Puri under the influence of their *adivasi*³ guru, Bhīma Bhoi,⁴ tried to remove the idols of Jagannath, Subhadra and Balarama to burn them, in accordance with their uncompromising stand on idolatry, sacred hierarchies and temple rituals. The reports brand the group as rioters, criminals, savages and fanatics for committing an act so revolutionary that it has been eliminated from the collective memory of an increasingly brahminised community. This wilful forgetting is not surprising given that Bhīma's devotional verses challenge the authority of the brahmin priestly and intellectual class. Asserting himself as a writer who deserved respect despite his social background, he defiantly declared that his poetry was not the result of any scriptural knowledge, but of his own experiences as a tribal. "It is a jest of my Guru that my eyes cannot see./ I mastered no Vedas or Sastras./ I compose my verse with my mind, through my experience, peering into the Void" (Baumer and Beltz 2010: 175).

Bhīma (1850-95) was the saint poet of Mahima Dharma, literally "the glorious dharma", which advocated devotion to an all-pervasive, formless absolute, equally accessible to all, as the way to salvation. This seemingly simple message rendered the worship of idols (*murtipuja*) redundant, including that of Jagannath, the central deity of Hinduism in Orissa and the state deity for centuries, questioned the hierarchies of caste and kinship (*jati-gata bibheda*), and the role of the brahmins as mediators between gods and men. Therefore, Bhīma rejected the ritual use of the *tulsi* (holy basil), a high symbol of Sanskrit and brahmanic Hindu identity, and in a radical reversal of social conventions, refused to accept food from brahmins. Mahima Swami, the faith's founding guru, preached in the distant territories of the tributary states, inhabited predominantly by lower-caste, untouchable and indigenous peoples. Mahima Dharma, then, was "doubly subaltern" – it was not only geographically and epistemologically separate from the colonising power, but also separate from powerful groups within Indian society itself (Bannerjee-Dube 2007: 8).

Bhīma was voicing his challenge to brahminical authority during the same period that Swami Vivekananda, the famous 19th century reformer of Hinduism, was bolstering brahminical, Vedic interpretations of Hinduism for the colonialists and educated nationalists in India and the western world. Unlike Vivekananda, Bhīma derived his "criticism of the Hindu tradition directly from

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the tradition itself” (Eschmann 1978: 375), drawing from the diverse intellectual traditions that Orissa society was steeped in. His devotional verse collections, the *Stuti Chintamani* and *Bhajan Mala*, identify him with a number of regional intellectual and narrative traditions such as the *panchasakha*, a group of 16th century poet saints who wrote for the masses in vernacular Oriya rather than in Sanskrit, the language of the educated elite. In doing so, he was also drawing on the legacy of the low caste, 15th century farmer Sarala Das who produced vernacular Oriya versions of the Sanskrit Hindu epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, and who was widely known and revered as *sudra muni*, or low caste sage.

Rather than drawing from the Sanskrit Vedas and Shastras of high-caste Hinduism,⁵ Bhīma got his conception of brahman (the ultimate and impersonal divine reality of the universe) as *Alekha*, or the “unwritten”, as well as his concept of *sunya*, or “the void”, from the Nagarjuna Buddhist and Tantric teachings that had influenced rural, tribal Orissa culture for centuries.⁶ Bhīma drew on symbolic tantric cosmology to portray the divine and the worshipper’s body as containing and creating the entire universe.⁷ His yoga drew on the *tantra* of the siddhas and nath yogis,⁸ emphasising the importance of the subtle body, its *chakras*, and the rising of *kundalini sakti*,⁹ elements purged by the mainstream Jagannath cults. Further, Bhīma’s language of *bhakti*, that of devotion and total surrender to the guru who embodies the divine, drew on the influence of Orissa’s medieval bhakti poets. His references to the Krishna story also have a slight Vaishnav tinge, though one derived from regional folk theatre, not written texts.

This essay focuses on Bhīma’s collections of popular devotional verses, the *Stuti Chintamani* and *Bhajan Mala*,¹⁰ sung even today during the ritual worship of brahman. The context of its recitation is a ritual called *dhuni*, devoted to *Alekha*, where a ritual fire is burnt and the verses are recited, accompanied by regional instruments. Diverse traditional, popular and local tunes are used as melodies. The songs are sung fervently by devotees and *babas* (ascetics), often illiterate, though their content brims with highly philosophical and mystical ideas that are far from simple. The verse structure of the text, which draws on the structure of bhakti poetry, facilitates its function as a devotional text meant to be memorised and chanted by the devotee, while mirroring the logical, “rational” sequence of the philosophy the poetry tries to convey. While Bhīma’s poetry is composed systematically, “with due regard to metre, rhythm and musicality”, and conveys a rational philosophy of social equality, his language is the “twilight language”, or “intentional language”, the *sandhya bhasa*, full of paradoxes and contradictions or “upside down” expressions (*ulta bamsi*). It is the mystical, paradoxical language of the Buddhist siddhas and nath yogis.¹¹ It is characterised by spontaneous rhetoric, as described by A K Ramanujan and developed by Hess, who calls it “rough rhetoric”, containing a combination of “rudeness and potency” as well as “simplicity and bluntness of style” (Hess 1987: 143; Baumer and Beltz 2010: 61-62). This is a phrase particularly apt for Bhīma, who belongs to the category of grass-roots vernacular religious poets and certainly shares the qualities of spontaneity and “rough rhetoric”.

Subaltern and Rational

Bhīma’s *Stuti Chintamani* and *Bhajan Mala* are counter hegemonic texts in both form and content. As I show in the textual analysis, Bhīma articulates his subaltern consciousness and calls for social change by highlighting the rationality that was the basis of his thought. His focus on rationality is particularly important because, both during his own time and today, his ideas were dismissed as irrational by those at the top of the colonial and religious hierarchies who found them threatening. In the larger colonial context, his conceptions of rationality were very different from those of Vivekananda, who highlighted the rationality of the Vedas for a western audience by charting out a course of Hindu nationalism replete with western scientific discourses of rationality. As I argue, the nationalist reform movements of which Vivekananda was a pioneer had little or no grass-roots support for their ideas – the Brahmo Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission imposed their reformist ideals from above in alliance with the colonial state apparatus and the upper castes.¹² Further, building on Sekhar Bandhopadhyay’s argument that Hindu society maintained its cultural hegemony and structure by frustrating reformist endeavours and marginalising dissidence (2004), I suggest that nationalist reform movements such as Vivekananda’s were themselves inextricable from this process of marginalisation. Rather than reforming Hindu society into a more egalitarian space, Vivekananda was strengthening its hierarchical structures by consolidating it into an increasingly upwardly mobile, upper caste, English-speaking, literate Hindu identity. It is not surprising that he set up secular distinctions between “rational” thought and “mythic” thought by simply suppressing any mythic, tantric or ritualistic elements (which were more “popular” than upper caste forms of religiosity) that he found.

Bhīma’s conceptions of rationality were also very different from those within his own religious community. The dharma that Visvanath Baba, the leader of the Mahima Dharma sect at Joranda from 1920 to the 1990s, popularised was radically different from what Bhīma thought. It ignored Bhīma’s revolutionary, dissident or heterodox tenets on the equal treatment of women, his stand against casteism, and his preference for the popular language, the colloquial Oriya. Visvanath Baba himself wrote in highly Sanskritised Oriya, gave ethical and ritual guidelines, prohibitions and commands, discriminated against women, and recognised social stratification based on caste (Baumer and Beltz 2010: 39-40). Most importantly for this argument, Visvanath Baba permanently established links between the Sanskrit tradition of Hinduism and Mahima Dharma, underlining that the “new” message of Mahima Swami offered a path of pure, rational, non-ritualistic monism that was Vedic in its valences.

Given the rewriting of Bhīma’s radical legacy by some of his followers, it becomes all the more important to highlight the unique, and startlingly modern, rationalities that were central to his thinking and in effecting social change. In doing so, this essay follows the example of scholars such as V Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Satya Mohanty to contribute to the emerging discussion of “indigenous” and “alternative” modernities that aims to “provincialise” European accounts of modernity without

resorting to cultural or historical relativism (Mohanty 2008: 5; Rao and Shulman 2003).¹³ Since the dichotomy of rationality vs irrationality often buttresses the conceptual binaries of modern vs premodern,¹⁴ one way to explore indigenous modernities is to explore how forms of rationality arose in non-western cultures. Indeed, one of the most important defining features of modernity, I argue, has been the suppression and devaluing of non-western knowledges through the domination of Enlightenment Reason over reason in general.

Rethinking Modernity

In articulating reason, I draw on Taylor's articulation of minimal rationality as the ability to think critically, which is the legacy of human beings in general. This minimal rationality, as Taylor and Frankfurt have elaborated, consists of, among other things, the ability to be logically consistent, to separate oneself from one's immediate context to evaluate one's life and one's desires in terms of larger ideas about the world, and the ability to trace one's own cognitive thought patterns (Frankfurt 1971; Taylor 1985). Enlightenment Reason, meanwhile, was the result of a particular movement emerging from a specific historical and spatial location in 18th century Europe. This literary analysis hopes to suggest ways of articulating convincing accounts of comparative modernities by turning to oft overlooked texts as valuable sources with which to rewrite colonial histories.¹⁵ For instance, Bhīma expresses theories of rationality in the aesthetic form of religious poetry, very different from the ways in which Occidental philosophers were doing it. Yet seeing it as nothing more than devotional poetry in the colonially constructed epistemic category "religion" would obscure the fascinating theorisations of rationality the aesthetic form enacts. As Mohanty points out, literary readings of such indigenous texts can carry out an interdisciplinary project of historical recovery, thereby reconceptualising "what we often condescendingly call the 'pre-modern'" (2008: 6).

To highlight just how radical Bhīma's ideas of rationality were, I begin with an exploration of how Vivekananda coupled the idea of minimal rationality with Enlightenment discourses of science to lend legitimacy to Hinduism for a western audience and for the high-caste landed aristocracy of Hindus that financed and supported his cause. In doing so, he echoes Taylor's coupling of rationality – the ability to understand things not merely as they impinge on us but outside the context of our immediate goals and desires – with the epistemology of Enlightenment science.¹⁶ By way of contrast, I turn to Bhīma who enacts two important and radical philosophies of rationality in his poetry. First, he theorises rationality from within the local aesthetic epistemes of devotional poetry to resist local brahmanic power structures and to carve out a modern theory of identity that relies on an individual's actions (*karma*) rather than his or her fate (*bhagya*). In the process of enacting a rationality drawn from Orissa's intellectual traditions, he self-consciously traces the logical consistency of his cognitive thought patterns and attempts to understand his own desires in the light of larger ideas about the world.

Second, Bhīma couples his rational social critique with a radical positing of secular rationality in the *ulti bamsi* or upside down language of Orissa's tribal religiosity. Thus I examine how, unlike

Vivekananda, Bhīma enables us to uncover forms of "secular rationality" in precolonial Indian religion, relatively uninfluenced by western theorisations of rationality. My positing of this universal capacity for "secular rationality", however, does not indicate the separation of religious and secular institutions in government. Epistemological secularism, according to Talal Asad, precedes political secularism and describes a sensibility or state of mind that distinguished living in myth, magic, ritual and the sacred from a state of mind based on rational understandings of the world (2003).

Further, my use of this definition implicitly challenges what Jakobsen and Pellegrini describe as Enlightenment secularism, "in which reason progressively frees itself from the bonds of religion and in so doing liberates humanity. This narrative poses religion as a regressive force in the world, one that in its dogmatism is not amenable to change, dialogue or non-violent conflict resolution, separates secularism from religion" and, in the process, "places secularism in a particular historical tradition, one that is located in Europe and grows out of Christianity" (2008: 2). Meanwhile, my alternative investigation of Asad's "epistemological secularism", which I suggest is a universal capacity, attempts to unsettle the universalisation of this Enlightenment idea of secularism and its positing of religion as "irrational", in opposition to the category of the "secular". In doing so, my analysis aims to decolonise the "secular" by highlighting the possibility of comparative secularisms that arose in the non-west, thus legitimising the epistemic modes through which subalterns often leave behind their intellectual legacies, and recognising them as modernities in their own right.

Vivekananda's Rationality: A Colonial Discourse?

Vivekananda's writings, I argue, can be read as the result of understanding rationality mainly through European Enlightenment categories of knowledge, both because these were the ones he held to be superior, and, as Niranjana Dhar has shown, because they enabled him to effectively represent Hinduism to the west and to the British-backed, upper caste and English-speaking Hindu aristocracy that supported him (1977: 134).¹⁷ I suggest that while Bengali nationalist reform movements such as Vivekananda's Ramakrishna Mission saw themselves as progressive, they took a top-down colonialist approach that had little grass-roots support. Rather than reforming Hindu society to benefit the lower castes and marginalised groups, they were managing subaltern groups for the benefit of the colonising British and for the upper caste Hindus who had managed to climb into the upper echelons of the colonial hierarchy.¹⁸ It is not surprising that like European thinkers of the time, Vivekananda believed that Enlightenment science was the ultimate rationality and therefore legitimised Hinduism through extensive comparisons to science. Last, this section considers how Vivekananda glossed over anything that would have been considered irrational by western standards. The result is that the indigenous forms of rationality present in, for example, Radha-Krishna worship or tantra, remained unexplored and consigned to the category "irrational".

Born Narendranath Dutta in Calcutta, a colonial metropolis, in 1863, Vivekananda was the chief disciple of the 19th century

mystic Ramakrishna Paramhansa and the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission. He is considered a key figure in the introduction of Vedanta and yoga to Europe and the US and is also credited with raising inter-faith awareness, bringing Hinduism to the status of a world religion during the end of the 19th century (Clarke 2006: 209). As Richard King (1999) and Ashis Nandy (1988) have pointed out, Vivekananda's reform of Hinduism was heavily influenced by occidental religious discourse and devoted to representing Indian spirituality to the west as rational. In doing so, he was one of the key figures involved in what King has called the modern construction of Hinduism, "a process which located the core of Indian religiosity in certain Sanskrit texts (the textualisation of Indian religion), and second by an implicit (and sometimes explicit) tendency to define Indian religion in terms of a normative paradigm of religion based upon contemporary western understandings of the Judaeo-Christian traditions" (1999: 105).¹⁹

This new *episteme* created the rising perception that Hinduism had become a corrupt shadow of its former Vedic self, and that the gap between the original Hinduism and contemporary Hindu beliefs and practices had to be filled by nationalist Hindu reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj and Vivekananda's Ramakrishna Mission. Vivekananda took on this task with gusto. His thought was developed during attempts to influence western views of Hinduism over two very long trips to the US in the 1890s when he founded a Vedanta Society in San Francisco and a Shanti Ashrama (peace retreat). Returning home from his first trip, which began in 1893 and lasted till 1897, he conducted a whirlwind speaking tour in India, and launched a number of English language journals for foreign as well as domestic subscribers. For instance, *Prabuddha Bharata* ("Awakened India") stated its objective was "to present the truths of the Hindu religion and the Vedanta in a simple and homely style, illustrating them by means of Puranic stories, philosophical tales and novels, and by the lives of great saints and sages" (Aravamudan 2005: 29). This periodical was a sophisticated theolinguistic organ, featuring stories of Vivekananda's missionary work, even as it retailed advertisements for photographs of spiritual leaders, "Hindu" timepieces and books on Indian religion (Aravamudan 2005: 55).

Vivekananda's ideal of rationality was clearly fashioned according to what a western audience would find compelling and engaging. More specifically, it was fashioned according to the dictates of European Enlightenment philosophy, where science was the epitome of the rational, to lend legitimacy to Hinduism. Thus he used Enlightenment science to back his representation of rationality in the Hindu philosophy of non-duality, or Advaita, which argues that the self does not exist separately from the divine (brahman). The concept of *Dvaita* describes the opposite, a god outside the self whom one must worship. According to Advaita, this concept of the god outside oneself is the unfortunate result of *maya*, which describes the limited, purely physical and mental reality in which our everyday consciousness has become entangled. *Maya* survives by preventing the individual from becoming one with, or attuned, to brahman. The aim of every human life, or *moksha* (spiritual salvation), is the union of the soul with this truth, with brahman, a condition that

Vivekananda sums up as "unity". He justifies non-duality, his ideal of the ultimate rationality.

Science is nothing but the finding of unity. As soon as science would reach perfect unity, it would stop from further progress, because it would reach the goal...chemistry could not progress further when it would discover one element out of which all others could be made. Physics would stop when it would be able to...discover one energy of which all the others are but manifestations, and the science of religion become perfect when it would discover Him who is the one life in a universe of death. All science is bound to come to this conclusion in the long run...the Hindu is only glad that what he has been cherishing in his bosom for ages is going to be taught in more forcible language, and with further light from the latest conclusions of science (Vivekananda 1964: 14).

Here Vivekananda uses the examples of chemistry and physics to suggest that they all point to the "unity" apparent in his non-dualist Hinduism. The most important discovery that physics and chemistry can make is discovering the "one energy", or the "Him" from which all life comes, and all science at its core is engaged in gathering more and more evidence to bolster this point of view.

Enlightenment Science

Further, while science can provide evidence for non-dualism as the ultimate truth of the universe, it must not be regarded as higher than Hindu philosophy because the Vedas preceded European science in founding key scientific principles.

There are theories in the Vedic philosophy about the origin of life on this earth very similar to those which have been advanced by some modern European scientists. You, of course, all know that there is a theory that life came from other planets. It is a settled doctrine with some Vedic philosophers that life comes in this way, from the moon (Vivekananda 1964: 130).

Vivekananda therefore refers to Raja yoga (cultivation of the mind through meditation) as a science rather than a philosophy. "The science of Raja yoga proposes to put before humanity a practical and scientifically worked out method of reaching the divine truth". He further elaborates on the precision and empiricism suggested by the words "practical" and "scientifically worked out method".

In science a certain method must be followed. You must go to the lab, take different substances, mix them up, compound them, experiment with them, and out of that will come a knowledge of chemistry. If you want to be an astronomer, you must go to an observatory, take a telescope, study the stars and planets, and then you will become an astronomer (Vivekananda 1964: 91).

In other words, Vivekananda's Hinduism is as rational as Enlightenment science was projected as being, with just as much of a precise empirical method through which to arrive at results.

The problem with this, of course, is that Vivekananda, and the reformist religion he led, ignored the actual specificities of Hindu rationality, particularly any aspects that would be considered "irrational" according to Enlightenment epistemes. His dismissal of the "irrational" from Hinduism meant that the indigenous forms of rationality present in, for example, tantric forms of worship, remained categorised as superstition, rather than being seen as "rational" in their own right. Just how much these forces

were at work in Vivekananda's version of Hindu rationality is clear from his representation of his guru, Ramakrishna, and the Ramakrishna Mission as the embodiment of his idea of a universal religion free of idol worship or tantrism, and of symbolic, ritualistic aspects. "Ay, long before ideas of universal religion and brotherly feeling between different sects were mooted and discussed in any country in the world, here, in sight of this city, had been living a man whose whole life was a Parliament of Religions, as it should be" (Vivekananda 1964: 235).

This did not only involve diluting the specificities of Hindu religiosity into a whitewashed, general "universal religion", but also actively hiding those aspects that would not be acceptable to a "Parliament of Religions". Ramakrishna, who Vivekananda first met in November 1881, did believe in the worship of deities – he had been a priest of the Dakshineswar Kali Temple, dedicated to the goddess Kali, which was influenced by the main strands of the devotional Bengali bhakti tradition. Ramakrishna was also a tantric, or someone who studied the use of the body as a vehicle towards moksha, or salvation, in both sexual and non-sexual ways; his first spiritual teacher was an ascetic woman skilled in tantra and Vaishnav bhakti. Vivekananda actively overlooked these elements, taking up only those elements of Ramakrishna's thought that supported his theories of non-dualism.²⁰

In his quest to refashion Ramakrishna's religious sensibility into one agreeable to a western audience, Vivekananda adamantly worked to rewrite Ramakrishna's biography so that few of these elements survived. As Narasingha P Sil has shown, he cautioned biographers to avoid "all irregular indecent expressions about sex because other nations think it the height of indecency to mention such things, and his life in English is going to be read by the whole world". He wrote to another biographer, "Take thought, get materials, write a sketch of Ramakrishna, studiously avoiding all miracles. The life should be written as an illustration of the doctrines he preached." Vivekananda also preached against Radha-Krishna worship, something that would have sorely troubled his master. In April 1897, he wrote to the latest Bengali biographer of Ramakrishna, "There is not the least necessity for teaching the divine love of Radha and Krishna. Remember that the episodes of the divine relationship between Radha and Krishna are quite unsuitable for young minds." Later he elaborated, "And wherever you hear the Radha-Krishna songs going on, use the whip right and left. The whole nation is going to rack and ruin! People with no self-control indulging in such songs!" (Sil 1993: 38-62). Further, idol worship for Vivekananda was a stunted, infantile version of rationality that humans took part in when they were not capable of anything better. The scriptures say,

External worship, material worship is the lowest stage; struggling to rise high, mental prayer is the next stage, but the highest stage is when the Lord has been realised...One thing I must tell you. Idolatry in India...is the attempt of undeveloped minds to grasp high spiritual truths...Idols or temples or churches or books are only the supports, the helps, of his spiritual childhood: but on and on he must progress (Vivekananda 1964: 15-18).

Vivekananda had no time for deities or their tantric associations; his dismissal of the "irrational" from Hinduism and his reframing

of Hinduism into a "Parliament of Religions" relegated indigenous forms of rationality present in, for example, Radha-Krishna worship, to the category of "superstition". Unlike Bhīma's rationality, he also fashioned Hindu religiosity into a mirror of western religiosity by actively seeking out the west as its main influence and audience. In the process, Vivekananda bolstered the cultural hegemony of the upper caste Hindus who financed him.

Rational Others: Bhīma

Like Vivekananda, Bhīma practised and theorised his own conceptions of religious rationality, but he did so through devotional poetry that tapped into forms of "popular" religiosity that were becoming increasingly marginalised by movements such as Vivekananda's. I turn to his work, as well as the various religious and intellectual traditions from which he drew inspiration, as examples of how rational states of mind arose in precolonial India in forms of knowledge now classified as "religious". This section begins with an exploration of the form Bhīma's devotional poetry took, before tracing the specific rationalities in his poetry. Then drawing on Taylor and Frankfurt, I outline the three distinct ways in which Bhīma asserted his rationality. He consistently detached himself from his immediate context as a poor, low caste tribal to evaluate how his life fit into larger ideas about the world, he reflected on and evaluated his own desires and will in the light of his position as an outcast, and self-consciously traced his own logical and cognitive thought patterns within his verse. His practice of these forms of rationality was inextricably linked to his radical politics of equality.

One reason why Bhīma's devotional verse may not have been recognised as carrying out the rational work that it does is that it has been judged by foreign epistemic and aesthetic categories. For instance, unlike Occidental thinkers, Hindu aestheticians have not always accepted poetry as one of the fine arts. The *acharyas*, or learned ones, did not even classify poetry as one among the 64 artistic skills (*chaunsath kalayen*). Rather, poetry was seen as a *vidya*, or form of knowledge, and a way of philosophising, while other forms of art were *upavidyas*. The form of Bhīma's poetry becomes doubly significant if seen as a vehicle through which he explored philosophical truths rather than simply an art form devoted to sensory pleasures. Indeed, Bhīma's verses and bhajans (singing the glory of god through a dialogue between mind, *mana*, and consciousness, *chaitanya*) are suffused with wistful prayer and yearning for the spiritual uplift of human beings.

The poetic form of Bhīma's devotional lyrics rendered it a form of philosophy according to Orissa's epistemic categories. In line with the importance of the message he wanted to convey within his poetry, Bhīma structured his verse with strict attention to form, with the number of his poems, stanzas and lines written line by line in prose style, forming a repeated pattern. The manuscript of *Stuti Chintamani* contains 100 *bolis* (poems), each of 40 lines. Every two lines make a stanza, each *boli* contains 20 stanzas, and each line contains exactly 20 letters. Bhīma's stringent attention to these numbers is shown by his noting of the exact number of stanzas so far composed after every five *bolis*. The whole book, he notes at the end, contains 2,000 stanzas in 100

bolis, drawing attention to the magnitude of his work, and by corollary his devotion to *Alekha* and the importance of his radical social message. Bhīma also drew on the structure of bhakti poetry to formulate his text, facilitating its function as a devotional text meant to be memorised and chanted by the devotee. Bhakti poetry starts with a *ghosa* or refrain repeated by the entire group of devotional singers and ends with a “signature line” expressing a prayer or an intense feeling. That the aesthetic form of the *Stuti Chintamoni* is suitable for memorising is not surprising given that this text was and is still largely transmitted orally, though a number of palm leaf manuscripts exist. Although these aspects are difficult to see in the written English translations I quote, I emphasise the way the logical sequence of the verse structure mirrors the rational progression of Bhīma’s thought and his investment in the merits of rationality.

Overcoming Maya

Bhīma uses his devotional verse to reflect three major explorations of rationality. The first is the ability to separate oneself from one’s immediate context to evaluate one’s life in terms of larger ideas about the world. In line with this notion, Bhīma argues that the self can only unite with brahman once one extricates oneself from maya. Maya describes our immediate context, the limited physical and mental reality in which our everyday consciousness has become entangled such as, for instance, the trappings of wealth and status. Maya must be overcome in order to attain moksha, or salvation, achieved not through any external rites or pilgrimages but through an intense meditative path, through a deep cleansing of the doors of perception till one is attuned to brahman, and therefore to the universe.

This journey of overcoming maya to become attuned with one’s own spiritual wealth is suggested by the title of Bhīma’s verse collection itself. *Stuti Chintamoni* literally means “eulogy to the thought jewel”, a mythical wish-fulfilling stone described in Nagarjuna Buddhism, which was an influence on Bhīma’s thought. The *mani* jewel was said to manifest whatever one desired, including treasures, clothing and food, while removing sickness and suffering. However, Chintamoni also describes the teachings and virtues of “the enlightened one”, the being who has reached moksha and is able to reflect on all states of the subconscious mind, including the ones tied up with maya, while not being defined or entrapped by them. Devotion to the enlightened Chintamoni, the being who possesses supreme knowledge of these states of mind, is the path to moksha. Bhīma’s title contains a play on metaphors of material as well as spiritual wealth, and as I demonstrate, his message concerning both was one with radical implications for the society in which he lived.

Bhīma demonstrates his rational ability to understand his own desires in the light of larger ideas about the world by pointing out that being blind to one’s immediate material circumstances, which represent maya, is acceptable as long as one has the ability to see within oneself and acquire spiritual wealth. He therefore describes maya using the metaphor of darkness: “There is no lamp/You keep the house dark” (Satpathy 2006: 45). This is a radical point, one that turns Bhīma’s lamentable circumstances as a poor and possibly blind tribal into a strength because it

emphasises that the value of a person should come from within rather than from socially constructed hierarchies. It is a rationality in line with Bhīma’s protest against social inequalities such as casteism and sexism. He therefore denigrates the rich and powerful who disregard the spiritual values he tries to impart.

Their minds are steeped in ignorance
And wicked are the high born.
When I speak of you as without desire,
Oh Svami, they just twist their moustaches in pride
(Baumer and Beltz 2010: 127).

The “high born”, or those born into a higher caste, are “wicked” because “their minds are steeped in ignorance” and false pride. Bhīma conveys their investment in the trappings of maya by describing their ignorant pride in their moustaches, even though, according to spiritual rules, brahmins are generally supposed to be clean shaven.²¹ Bhīma asserts instead that true material wealth is that which comes from spiritual devotion.

What you gave me is merely a glance.
Of compassion, grace and mercy.
I paid you back with my devotion and service.
What remains of my debt or its interest?
(Baumer and Beltz 2010: 215).

In this verse addressed to the divine, Bhīma measures material riches through spiritual metaphors such as “compassion, grace and mercy”, which he “pays back” not in monetary terms but through “devotion and service”. His use of fiscal metaphors conveys that the riches of spiritual enlightenment are much more valuable than financial rewards. He reinforces this point by ending with a question that challenges his listeners, asserting that there should be no question of “debt or interest” because “devotion and service” are more valuable than external signifiers of wealth and rationally distancing himself from his immediate external circumstances to understand himself in relation to the larger spiritual truths he values.

The emphasis on valuing a person according to his or her inner being rather than the external trappings of maya, such as material wealth and social status, is reinforced by the hagiographic legends that surround Bhīma’s existence and which he actively propagated in his lifetime. According to one of these,

When Mahima Swami, Bhīma Bhoi’s guru came to visit him, the blind Bhīma said, “If you have come to bless me let me be able to see you.” And then he could see. He came out and saw the two seers standing outside like the “Sun and Moon”. Mahima Swami blessed him with the intense power of poetic vision and said that he had a preordained role to play in the propagation of the tenets of the Mahima cult in this century. Bhīma prayed to him: “O Lord, with the power of vision you gave me I have seen your divine feet but I don’t want to see all the dirt in this world. Bless me that the outside world remains invisible to me.” The Swami blessed him saying: “Let your inner eyes open and the external eyes close as before.” Bhīma again went blind.²²

Here, sight functions as a metaphor of enlightenment, and Bhīma stresses that true “sight” does not require the functions of the physical body. These legends reinforce the point that moksha can only be reached by concentrating on the inner self through intense meditation, rather than through a focus on the external self and the requirements of the physical body. Only those who

go down this path of spiritual self-awareness will be able to overcome maya and become one with brahman.

Since one must detach oneself from one's immediate context to achieve moksha, in some of his other devotional songs (bhajans), Bhīma focuses on the inner world of the self, describing only the physical landscape to emphasise a shimmering landscape of the inner world.

There is no tree nor its roots
Yet its shadows lengthen
There are fruits without buds or flowers
The leaves expand without stalks
And he is reached through the path of actionlessness
(Mahapatra 1983: 57).

Here, Bhīma metaphorically displaces the immediate physical reality. "There is no tree nor its roots", no buds or flowers, no stalks, there are just the effects of these things on the internal world of the self. For Bhīma, a rich, spiritual state of being can yield the productive, meaningful aspects of life without the pleasant, yet ultimately unnecessary, objects that produce them, such as stalks, buds, flowers and trees. The devotee can benefit from the true riches of the world while forgoing those that do not really matter. He can enjoy the welcoming shade that trees provide, although not the tree itself; he can satisfy his hunger with fruit from the tree but not smell the fragrance of the flowers that usually accompanies the fruit. The final sentence "and he is reached through the path of actionlessness" suggests that these images are metaphors for a flourishing inner state of mind, one that needs only "actionlessness", or the introspective journey of the mind, to achieve equivalents of sensual pleasures such as a flower's scent. Bhīma's "actionless" journey enacts a self-aware quest to dissociate the self from maya and connect it with larger spiritual truths attained through meditation.

Bhīma's verses also enact another rational practice – that of being able to reflect on one's own desires. As Frankfurt argues, one form of rationality that makes one human is the ability to be self-aware and self-conscious about one's own desires by tracing one's own cognitive thought patterns. Bhīma's complaints enact this cognitive rationality by separating those desires that are linked to maya from those that he feels deserve to be satisfied. He therefore rebukes himself for longing for wealth and status that is unreasonable or undeserved.

My heart always longs for tapasya
And to chant the One-lettered Name
Yet I am unable, entangled as I am
In many worldly desires.
(Baumer and Beltz 2010: 105).

Here Bhīma rues himself for desiring the worldly desires that "entangle" him and distract him from his *tapasya*, or spiritual practice, and wishes to distance himself from these "sins" of longing. "Just as darkness cracks up when the Sun's rays fall on it, similarly O Lord cut away my sins with the sword of knowledge. Just as when the moon rises at night, light shines everywhere; similarly abolish the burden of my sin O Lord" (Mahapatra 1983: 71). Once again, Bhīma uses the sun and moon metaphor of light displacing darkness. Yet, as before, the sun and the moon are

not symbols of physical reality, but of Mahima Dharma's gurus, who will lead to inner light, inner knowledge and "abolish the burden of my sin". Bhīma is self-consciously describing the objective, rational act of reflecting and evaluating his own desires for undeserved wealth or status, a process key to extricating himself from maya and achieving moksha.

Reasonable Desires

While Bhīma is able to recognise which of his desires are unreasonable, in his enactment of cognitive rationality, he also recognises the desires that are reasonable. At a radical point Bhīma asserts that he deserves to have his basic needs met. Thus he tempers his emphasis on the value of one's "inner self", that responsible for producing one's thoughts and actions, by stressing that being detached from the material world does not mean that he does not need any material comforts. While he refers to being caught up or entrapped in the illusion that is one's material reality in negative imagery, he also stresses that to escape from maya, a "shelter" of some sort is needed.

Where shall I go?
Where shall I find a shelter?
I do not really know.
Unruly Maya assaults
Again and yet again.
How long shall I bear it?
(Satpathy 2006: 45).

"Shelter" works at both a literal and a metaphorical level here. At the metaphorical level it signifies the mental strength needed to conquer a maya that is all encompassing and inescapable. Bhīma reinforces the overwhelming power of maya through the verse form, which begins with a question and ends with one, and through the alliteration of "assault" and "again and again". One of the central lines of the verse takes a break from the questioning and states "I do not really know", capturing his hopelessness. However, "shelter" also works at the literal level. Elsewhere, Bhīma makes the point that if one's material wealth derives from one's inner state of mind, he and his fellow devotees should not be treated like dogs and consigned to poverty just because they are adivasis or members of a lower caste.

I get easily neither food to eat
Nor clothes to wear.
My life is lowly, I am an outcaste.
I know not when I shall receive your grace.

You are the great Lord and Creator, yet all is in vain.
You have given me this body,
Yet my most basic needs you have not met.
What justice is this, Oh Lord?
(Baumer and Beltz 2010: 123).

In the Oriya original, "basic needs" refers to *manda*, the word for gruel. Bhīma is not talking about his desire for the lord to grace him with material wealth, a desire he dismisses as "sinful", but simply asking for basic clothing and enough food to eat, that too of the quality just needed for him to survive. Asserting his basic rights, Bhīma demands "justice", making the modern point that there are some things that deserve to be satisfied just by virtue of his humanity.²³

Modern Notion of Identity

While asserting the innate dignity of himself as a human, or in the religious sense a soul that contains brahman, as the reason he deserves his basic needs met, Bhīma simultaneously contends that he also deserves that which he works for.²⁴ In doing so, he makes a radical point, tying the value of an individual and what he or she deserves, not to traditional notions of gender and caste-bound identities that are static and inescapable, but to modern notions of identity that are tied to the value of the work an individual does. Bhīma outlines and links this rational and thoroughly modern idea to the Hindu notion of karma, the law that proclaims that one's past actions determine one's social status as well as the good or bad events in one's life. He writes,

What you have written I enjoy,
Following the unseen karma.
I fill my belly with a morsel of food
That I earn from daily toil
(Baumer and Beltz 2010: 103).

Bhīma begins by referencing the widespread belief that karma is linked to fate. Brahman has “written” “unseen karma”, determining a soul's fate without the soul being able to see its destiny, let alone change it. Bhīma, however, turns this on its head, transferring a theological point which generally refers to how actions in one's past life decide one's static and rigid caste identity in the next, to a modern notion of identity in which one can change one's current circumstances according to one's own actions in the present. Thus the karma Bhīma is referring to is not “unseen” after all; it is the result of carefully calculated rational action. He highlights the fact that he fills his belly with food that “I earn from daily toil”. The word “earn” reinforces the notion that the food he eats is directly the result of his actions.

Bhīma also enacts his rationality by self-consciously recognising the logical consistencies in his cognitive thought processes. His devotional verse expands his argument that the value of an individual not only comes from his inherent worth as a “soul” issued from brahman, or in secular terms, just by virtue of being human, but also from his actions. He therefore traces the relationships between cause and effect to reinforce his point that identities are made according to one's actions rather than being fixed and unconditional.

If the pandit or a poet does not study,
Knows not the auspicious and inauspicious times,
If he is without his almanac or chalk or betel-nut,
How can he understand virtue and vice?

If a yogi is mad for sense-objects
And cares not for yoga-sadhana,
If he has no faith in the practice of mind-and-breath,
How can he perform his tapasya?

If a brahmin does not fulfil his ritual duties,
And follows not the Vedas, if he repeats no mantra,
If he does not practice the three times of prayer,
And offers oblations to the dead, then he is of no use
(Baumer and Beltz 2010: 107).

Here, Bhīma explores the logical links between a person's actions and the outcomes of those actions; if a yogi is mad for sensual objects, how can he perform his tapasya, or spiritual practice, since the very definition of tapasya is to detach oneself

from the pleasures of the senses? And if a brahmin does not fulfil his ritual duties, he “is of no use” as a brahmin, since the very definition of brahmin is to fulfil these rites. Apart from the logical consistency in these statements, they also make a radical social point. A brahmin is not a brahmin unless he does his duty, just as a pandit or a poet cannot understand virtue and vice if they do not study these things. There is no such thing as an identity that one is born with; identities are constructed through one's actions. The corollary of this is that brahmins do not deserve their place at the top of the social hierarchy anymore than anyone else does. As the verse progresses, Bhīma uses his highlighting of the logical schema of cause and effect to make increasingly controversial claims. Having prepared the rational grounds for fewer objections from fellow devotees and listeners by starting with the less subversive examples of the poet, pandit and yogi, by the end, he is questioning the fixed nature of brahmanic identity by the same logical sleight of hand. Indeed, he is so bold that by the last two verses, he is challenging Brahma's unconditional right to be called the creator, and Lord Vishnu's unconditional right to be lord of the universe.

If Brahma did not create
The body of three qualities,
And if he cares not for birth or destiny,
Then how can he be called the creator?

If Lord Visnu does not nourish the 56 crore creatures,
If he does not recognise the Self
And protect the Dharma,
Then his lordship is not justified
(Baumer and Beltz 2010: 108).

Even the divine are not spared Bhīma's radical rational practice. Thus he makes the point that identities are constructed, not random, and rely on one's actions. Further they are not static but based on changing sociopolitical contexts that need to be questioned when they do not meet the needs of those who deserve better.

Secular Rationality? Tantra, Ritual and Deity Worship

This section examines how Bhīma's radical rationality in *Stuti Chintamani* and *Bhajan Mala*, while positing a modern politics of social equality, also demonstrates that precolonial Indian thought did possess secular distinctions between rational thought and mythic thought (notably different from Enlightenment definitions of the secular). And those categories of the modern, such as the epistemological “secular rational” I defined earlier through Asad, arose from indigenous epistemologies, before and during colonialism, relatively outside the influence of colonial epistemologies. In tracing these forms of rationality, this section argues that, often, epistemologically secular understandings with their distinction between myth, magic and ritual ideas of the world and rational ideas of the world were rooted in what European thought classified as “religious” belief so that the secular arose from within “religion” itself.²⁵

Why is tracing secular understandings in Bhīma's poetry so important? Doing so implicitly questions the sharp Orientalist distinction between modern/philosophy/rational/the west and premodern/mysticism/irrational/the non-west. It was this binary which Hindu nationalists such as Vivekananda set out to change

when they asserted the inherent rational monism that was supposedly central to Hinduism. In doing so, however, they used the very Judaeo-Christian frameworks they thought they were resisting, focusing on the glorification of the textual Vedas and Shastras, while denigrating the use of rituals, idol worship and mythology. Thus this section also asks whether it is possible to find rational states of mind in “religion” without obscuring aspects such as symbolic ritual and idol worship that western models of rationality would classify as irrational. I argue that Bhīma destabilises colonial binaries but without whitewashing the bread and butter of Hindu religiosity, those supposedly “irrational” aspects of religious life that the subaltern tribal groups of society thrived on and which were central to their intellectual thought.

In the literary analysis which follows, I explore Bhīma’s “irrational” modes of worship through his *ulti bamsi*, examining how his *sadhana* (act of purifying the mind), which included the yogic practice of meditation, tantric symbolism, and the contemplation and worship of deities such as Krishna, was inseparable from his rational thought processes. In doing so, Bhīma differentiated states of living in myth, magic, and ritual that involved rational understandings of the world from those that did not, therefore positing a secular rationality that distinguished between different forms of mystic religiosity.

Continuity of Rational Thought and ‘Irrational’ Practice

In my analysis of Bhīma’s rationality so far, I have emphasised his cognitive processes, drawing attention to his abandonment of ritual, idol worship, pilgrimages and the mode of the symbolic for intense cognitive introspection and meditation that articulated a radical politics of rational social equality. Bhīma defiantly declared his rejection of idol worship, “I do not bow to gods and goddesses, To idols of clay and stone. O Lord, In search of liberation, I meditate on You” (Satpathy 2006: 38). His poetry highlights the revolutionary nature of such ideas by drawing attention to the opposition he faced from those who fumed that “devotees of Mahima do not care for Vedic diktat ... they have dumped in the nether world all the rites and rituals honoured in the Vedas” (Satpathy 2006: 140). However, Bhīma’s religion was just as much about tantric ritual, symbolism, mythology and icons as it was about cognitive introspection. While *Alekha* was a metaphor for “truth” and the way to *Alekha* was to discover the all-powerful, all-pervading, formless and indescribable truth within oneself through rational thought processes, Bhīma also engaged with tantric ritual and with the *saguna* tradition, which contemplates a personal god with a form and attributes, intimate and accessible, full of compassion and mercy, come down to earth to save suffering beings.²⁶ Bhīma’s Ultimate Reality, then, was at once dual (made up of a god outside the self) and non-dual (made up of a god within oneself reached through thought and introspection). Further, he was reachable through true devotion that produced spiritual knowledge (*bhakti yoga*) as well as intellectual knowledge arising out of difficult reflection and introspection (*gyan yoga*).

In the light of all this, Bhīma’s religious thought seems far from being an articulation of the secular rational, a mode of knowledge

that distinguishes between rational states of mythic, magical and ritual being and irrational ones. The seeming lack of this distinction also renders Bhīma’s thought as full of logical inconsistencies and contradictions. However, a literary analysis of his poetry reveals that he was well aware of these contradictions. Indeed, he highlights them through his mystical *sandhya bhasa*, the *ulti bamsi*, literally the “upside down” language.

He is neither water nor wind.
He is not formless, yet has no form.
He is neither knowledge nor ignorance,
Nor even the conception of the Veda
(Baumer and Beltz 2010: 181).

This is an intentionally paradoxical verse. In Nagarjuna Buddhist thought, which Bhīma drew on, water signifies cohesion, and wind, expansion. The two are opposites. Similarly, in the verse, brahman “has no form” that one can perceive, yet he is not formless. The verse structures itself around pairs of opposites: water/wind, formless/form, and knowledge/ignorance in its description of brahman, providing a logical conundrum. The only line that does not have an opposition at its centre is the last. Bhīma does not say that brahman is the Veda and simultaneously not the Veda, making the line a strong rejection of the Vedas as vehicles towards brahman, especially given the oppositions that structure the rest of the verse. The *ulti bamsi* reappears in another deliberately contradictory verse.

With waves control the water
In the pond without banks.
At the feet of the Formless of Infinite joy
You shall live forever bearing the brilliance of brahman.
The river running upstream is full to the brim
(Baumer and Beltz 2010: 303).

The lines in this verse are full of intentionally logically non-functional images. Far from controlling water, as Bhīma writes, waves disrupt water. A “pond without banks” cannot be called a pond. Similarly the “formless” cannot have discernible feet because if it does, it must have form. With these paradoxes, Bhīma gestures towards a space beyond representation, that of the void that is brahman. *Alekha* brahman, after all, stands for the absolute that cannot be defined, seen or described. If one grasps this, one can reach the void and “live forever bearing the brilliance of brahman”. This is an internal process of meditation, evidenced by the last line. “The river running upstream is full to the brim” is an image frequently used by the Natha *yogis* and the *panchaskha*, which serves as a metaphor for *ulata sadhana*, or “upside down practice”, the regressive process of spiritual practice that flows against the currents of worldly existence.²⁷

Resolving Opposites

However, I argue that Bhīma’s *ulti bamsi* posits these logically non-functional, paradoxical images to resolve them, in the process describing a *tapasya* that is a secular practice, one which does make distinctions between rational understandings of the world and the irrational ones he denigrates. To this end, Bhīma’s *ulti bamsi* depicts a practice of overcoming opposites that posits a secular mode of ritual being in which rational thought and certain ritual practices are one, serving the same ends, and

elaborating the same epistememes of rationality. In doing so, he elevates those symbolic and ritualistic practices that are one with his rational thought above those that are not.

When you measure the measureless and eat the inedible,
The company of saints destroys past sins.
If you meditate on the unimaginable brahman day and night,
The body is transformed anew.
If you can see the essence of the unseen,
You can recite the unuttered prayer.
Know the unknowable
And worship the formless.
If you want to cross over
Dive into the practice of nirveda.
True knowledge and the path of liberation
Are found at the doorstep of the Guru
(Baumer and Beltz 2010: 304-05).

In these verses, Bhīma speaks of a knowledge beyond duality that contains an invitation to a practice of overcoming opposites so that their contradictions are dissolved. Further, the verses demonstrate that the process of overcoming opposites relies on the idea that, in some modes of religiosity, rational thought and ritual practice are one. The first verse posits the idea that the practice of “measuring the measureless” and “eating the inedible” will produce the thought or enact the spiritual process in which the “measureless”, or *Alekha*, will become reachable or “measurable”, a process that will destroy “past sins”. Similarly, meditations on the “unimaginable Brahmin” will result in a practice that transforms the body. The final verse consolidates these ideas by suggesting that “the practice of nirveda”, a practice which denotes a bodily detachment from worldly objects, will produce thought, or the “true knowledge”, that leads to the “path of liberation”.

The *ulti bamsi* and the contradictions it encapsulates contain the seeds of its own resolution by suggesting the redefining of some modes of religious practice, such as the symbolic rituals of tantra, as being continuous with and inseparable from thought. While western anthropology would categorise these practices as modes of symbolic “ritual”, Catherine Bell (1992) proposes that so-called ritual activities be removed from their isolated position as special, paradigmatic acts and be seen as culturally strategic ways of acting. She argues that seeing ritual activities as actions separate from thought, as people doing ritual and necessarily thinking something else, is logically non-functional. Instead, ritual is a mode of practice and thus continuous with other modes of behaviour within everyday life, including thought. Pierre Bourdieu suggests something similar when he writes that social agents operate according to an implicit practical logic and bodily dispositions, or “habitus”, which create meaning in the doing. One learns to think a certain way through bodily practice; the bodily practice produces the thought (Bourdieu 1990: 54). Bhīma’s creative transformation of language through the mystical *ulti bamsi* ends up transcending all opposites in the same way that the devotee’s mind has to overcome the duality of *maya* to achieve salvation, making the point that rational thought and ritual practice can be one. Ultimately Bhīma’s cognitive introspection can be seen as a product of his practical *sadhana* rather than his *sadhana*

being an out of place footnote to his rational pursuit of *moksha* in the way it was for Vivekananda.²⁸

If we understand Bhīma’s symbolic and mythological path to the divine through the body as producing his rational cognitive introspection, we can also explain some of his supposed logical inconsistencies. For instance, he registers his hatred for the womb-born gross body, or *sthula sharira*, but simultaneously also reveals a seemingly unselfconscious affectionate concern for the well-being of the material body. The idea that the body will not be afflicted by a process of decay if one takes refuge in Mahima dharma is reiterated throughout the text.²⁹ However, if one sees Bhīma’s descriptions of the body as related to different stages towards achieving *moksha*, they no longer seem contradictory. Instead the paradoxes describe how the physical process of the body becoming beautiful enacts and produces the spiritual process of drawing the self closer to god, and vice versa.

May this body of mine shine like a mirror. May it dazzle like the lightning. May the formless brahman remain kind to me. May this form of mine glow like burnished copper.

May this form of mine sparkle like gold; may it shine like the luminous sun; may I remain firm, in my devotion to the revered Guru through the ages (Satpathy 2006: 52).

Bhīma emphasises the direct link between the physical process of bodily transformation and the spiritual progress towards *moksha* through a play on the word “firm”. Since the preceding line has been about the beautification of the body, “firm” is clearly a reference to a firm, youthful body. Beltz therefore points out that the chanting of these verses was part of a ritual performance meant to heal the chanter; the thoughts evoked by the verse enacted the bodily practice of healing to the extent that Bhīma was credited with healing powers (2004: 169). However the line that follows, “in my devotion to the revered Guru” makes it apparent that Bhīma also means “firm” in devotion, or firm in his beliefs. The subtle body (*suksma sharira*) brings about the enlightened state of *moksha* and vice versa; Bhīma’s engagement with the symbolism of the body gives birth to an enlightened state of cognition that leads to *moksha*. The coexistence of the *sthula sharira* and the *suksma sharira* are not logically inconsistent and therefore not irrational; they are simply different steps on the way to *moksha*.

Giving Form to the Formless

Another seeming logical inconsistency in Bhīma’s thought is the coexistence of the *nirguna* (without form) and *saguna* (with form) traditions of *bhakti*. The divine is simultaneously formless, reachable only through cognitive introspection, and a personal god incarnated in the form of mythological deities. Thus his reality is at once dual, made up of a god outside the self, and non-dual, made up of a god within oneself reached through thought and introspection. Indeed, Bhīma often frames the tantric union of *prakriti* (female) with *purusha* (male) through the mythological union of two deities, in one verse, Radha (here *prakriti*) and Krishna (here brahman or *purusha*). “Your union with Prakriti/Created the world./From being nameless/You acquired a name;/From being formless,/You took up a form/

Fondly, people call you Krishna –/The one who dances beneath the kadamba tree”.³⁰

However, these logical inconsistencies are resolved through Bhīma’s understanding that once he has achieved the spiritual goal of reaching moksha, he will achieve the physical goal of becoming an embodiment of the deity; he will give form to the formless. One contemplates the formless brahman till one sees oneself merging with the divine, embodying the form of the formless. Bhīma writes, “Gurudev, my Lord is the Nirguna Purusa. I am the one who is saguna. May the Lord show me the path as I enter the woods.” The “woods” represent the deep, dark, thorny path involved in achieving the merging of the saguna with the nirguna. When achieved, however, the resulting union of the disciple with the divine is so natural and complete that the formless divine merges with the form of the disciple.

You will only understand the mystery of the body,
As described in the scriptures, when you and your Guru are one.
As milk and water are perfectly mixed,
More so must you unite your minds.
Between who is Guru and who is disciple,
There is no difference at all.
The Lord and his devotee have but one body,
They eat their meals together
(Baumer and Beltz 2010: 179).

The verses highlight the absolute inseparability of the guru, who is the embodiment of the divine, and the *shisya*, or devotee, after enlightenment has been achieved. There is “no difference”, they are of “one body”, and the form contains both disciple and guru so completely that when one carries out a

bodily function of eating or drinking, the other does too. It is no longer the gross body sitting down to eat but the divine; once again, a spiritual practice results in a physical one. The seeming logical contradictions of the *ulti bamsi* signal their own resolution by pointing towards the continuity of modes of symbolic practice, such as tantric rituals and *bhakti yoga*, with the spiritual, introspective process of drawing the self closer to god. In the process, this “whole rationality” also emphasises those rituals that produce the thought processes and *tapasya* that leads to moksha, demonstrating that Bhīma does distinguish between the “infinite pilgrimages and rituals/that lead up to the Lord” and those that will enable the devotee to reach spiritual enlightenment. Bhīma’s intentional twilight language enacts a secularism that comes from within his religious practice itself by describing a secular state of mind that distinguished between myth and ritual that was rational, and that which was not.

A Universalist Idea of Rationality

Bhīma’s poetry, in articulating a rationality of radical social equality and a theory of secular rationalism in colonial India, lays the foundations for an indigenous comparative modernity. His aesthetic verse encourages one to see that universalism does not have to mean that the exact same idea, rationality, for instance, gets instantiated in the same ways in all contexts. A universalist idea of rationality would recognise that other cultures have forms of thought which are just as rational as western forms of thought, even if they are not scientific. A general



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idea of rationality, this kind of universalism would argue, gets challenged and instantiated universally, albeit in different manifestations. It thus implicitly affirms that other epistemic frameworks, including those that emerge from marginalised cultural and religious spheres, are just as valuable as those imposed from above, such as Vivekananda's emulation of Enlightenment scientific rationality.

In some south Asian contexts, secular rationality arose from within religion itself and in the process challenged many of the binaries set up by the categories "modern" and "premodern". Reading how Bhīma articulates an indigenous rationality through the aesthetic form of his poetry enables us to decolonise indigenous thinkers, and give them back their ability to articulate their own identities. Further, their enacting of such reason is emancipatory because it encompasses a diverse set of theoretical

practices emerging from, and responding to, colonial legacies while exposing the abuses of power inherent in them. The material they provide, if read as not being completely subsumed by the logic of colonising Enlightenment Rationality as Vivekananda's was, enables us to change the terms of the conversation about modernity. It enables us to see a vast array of local narratives from all corners of the world conflicting, intersecting or adding to one another, all contributing to the modernity we live in today. More importantly though, because different kinds of thinking are able to coexist with European thought rather than be dominated and humiliated by it, we are left with a way of thinking that renders all it uses, including that from Europe, universally marginal, fragmentary and unachieved and turns modernity into a universal legacy. It is a way of thinking that tells it like it is.

NOTES

- 1 Colonial presuppositions about the role of sacred texts in "religion" predisposed Orientalists to focus on such texts as the essential foundation for understanding the Hindu people, resulting in the literate brahmins, for whom religious texts like the Vedas and Shastras were central, becoming representative of the Hindu religion and enjoying elevated social, economic and political status (King 1999: 101-02).
- 2 The colonial law keepers underscored the irrationality of the Mahima Dharmis by defining them as lunatics and fanatics. The *Utkala Deepika*, an Oriya newspaper patronised by the upper classes, stressed the lowly origin and filthy habits of the attackers (Bannerjee-Dube 2007: 51).
- 3 The term "adivasi" was coined in the 1930s by the British to refer to the original inhabitants of a given region and also carries the connotation of past autonomy disrupted by the British. However, recent scholarship indicates that there is no clear evidence of an autonomous adivasi society; tribal leaders often achieved the higher status identification of the Hindu Rajput-kshatriyas by inviting brahmins to settle in their domain, perform ritual services and "discover" genealogical validation for their demand for kshatriya status. Thus, it is important not to conflate tribal social status with that of the lower castes (despite the co-opting of Bhīma Bhoi by the untouchable Ganda-Panas as a symbol of strength), even as we recognise the particular forms of poverty and discrimination tribals may have faced (Sinha 1959, 1962; Singh 1985).
- 4 In truth, Bhīma's involvement in this incident is questionable. The Sambalpur District Gazetteer only linked him to the events decades later in 1908 because the instigators marched to Puri from Sambalpur, which is where Bhīma emerged as the main leader of the faith after Mahima Swami's death (Bannerjee-Dube 2007: 53; 2001: 149-77).
- 5 Mahima Dharma consists of two monastic orders from different sections of society. The unorthodox *kaupinadhari*s in western Orissa are mostly from marginalised castes and the *bakkaladhari*s in Joranda, with their highly organised, regulated monastery, are from rich farming castes. For an account of the conflicts between the two, see Beltz (2006: 86-93).
- 6 *Alekh* suggests that the absolute that is brahman cannot be represented, defined, seen or written about. *Alekh*a comes from the Sanskrit root *lekh* or *likh*, which means "to write". *Alekh* means that which is "unwritten", an implicit challenge to the educated brahmin religious authorities and the colonial institutionalisation of their written texts.
- 7 Bhīma was very much influenced by tantric cosmology that suggested all the elements of the universe, including the ancient *yogis* and places of pilgrimage, exist in one's own body. In tantric *sadhana* the body is a link between outer and inner; one can discover the divinity within oneself by using the body as a container of the divinity without. Bhīma therefore instructs the devotee to "locate within your body the holy pilgrimages of the outside world. None so foolish as a yogi who wanders from place to place on the earth." The way to "journey into your body and create therein the vast universe" is to "perform the rites of yoga". There the yogi will find that "the slave of the Lord contains within all nine continents, and the infinite universe". See Baumer in Bannerjee-Dube and Beltz (2008).
- 8 A *siddha* in Sanskrit means one who has attained spiritual enlightenment. The Sanskrit word *nāthā* denotes the path towards enlightenment and the word itself is a synonym for brahman. The Nath tradition, a sub-sect of the *siddha* tradition, was founded by Matsyendranath, a simple fisherman, in the eighth century, and further developed by Gorakshanath. These two individuals are revered in Nagarjuna Buddhism for perfected spiritual attainment. The Natha Sampradaya does not recognise caste barriers, and was adopted by outcasts and kings alike. The language of the Natha *yogis* is the *sandhya bhasa* which influenced *panchasaikha* literature. See note 11.
- 9 *Kundalini shakti*, Sanskrit for "serpent power", is energy thought to reside within the sleeping body like a coiled serpent in the root *chakra* (the centre of subtle energy) at the base of the spine, and is aroused through spiritual discipline to bring about enlightenment. In Tantra Yoga, *kundalini* is an aspect of Shakti, the divine female energy and consort of Shiva.
- 10 Bhīma's Oriya text is very popular but there are only three accurate translations in English. I use the complete and scholarly 2010 translation by Johannes Beltz and Bettina Baumer, long-time scholars of Mahima Dharma, and supplement it with Sidharth Satpathy's (2006) translation of *Stuti Chintamani*. For other *bhajan*s not in the above translations, I use Sitakant Mahapatra's (1983) translations.
- 11 The first known instance of the *sandhya bhasa* is found in the 8th-12th century Vajrayana Buddhist *caryagiti*, or "songs of realisation", from the tantric folk tradition in eastern India. The language exemplifies some of the earliest instances of the Assamese, Oriya, Maithili and Bengali languages. The writers of the Charyapada were the Buddhist Mahasiddhas or *Siddhacharyas* of the various regions of Assam, Bengal, Orissa and Bihar (see note 8). The *sandhya bhasa* literally means the "twilight language" in Sanskrit, or *alo-andhari* (half expressed and half concealed). However, later evidence from a number of Buddhist texts suggests that it was called the "intentional language", or the *sandhya bhasa* in Sanskrit (Mukherjee 1981: 55).
- 12 Indian caste feudalism was strategically consolidated through an alliance of brahmanism and colonial state power, all for their own benefit (Dirks 2001; Omvedt 1994).
- 13 This is very different from attempts to "provincialise Europe" by scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty who analyse how European Enlightenment ideas were appropriated in India to produce a modernity that was just as Indian as European. As Chakrabarty writes, "Provincialising Europe is a project of globalising European thought by exploring how it may be renewed both for and from the margins" (Chakrabarty 2000: back cover).
- 14 Orientalist historiography, such as James Mill's (1840) *History of British India*, often characterised India as premodern, with Indian history culminating in the "liberating" arrival of the British. This temporality was buttressed by the production of numerous studies that pointedly excluded any intellectual, rational contributions from the non-west. The result was a sharp distinction between modern/philosophy/rational/the west and pre-modern/mysticism/irrational/the non-west. Vivekananda and other nationalists set out to challenge this binary when they asserted the inherent rationalism that was supposedly central to Hinduism but did so through the Judaeo-Christian frameworks they thought they were resisting, glorifying the Vedas and Shastras, and denigrating rituals, idol worship and mythology.
- 15 This paper follows the example of other efforts in this vein such as Satya Mohanty's literary reading of the Oriya *Lakshmi Purana* for a theorisation of a precolonial modernity containing both a feminist message and a radical message of caste equality (Mohanty 2008) and Rao and Shulman's readings of south Indian folk epics, courtly poetry, and prose narratives to argue for the existence of historical narratives in pre-colonial India (2003).
- 16 Vivekananda often notes science's supposed ability to understand individual experiences through larger ideas about the world. "The scientist does not tell you to believe in anything, but he has certain results which come from his own experiences, and, when he asks us to believe in his conclusions, he appeals to some universal experience of humanity" (Swami Vivekananda 1964).
- 17 Although the Ramakrishna movement was originally a lower middle class one, Vivekananda turned it into an all-India success through the financial support of the upper caste Hindu landed aristocracy; his first trip to the US was financed by the Maharajas of Khetri, Ramnad and Mysore (Dhar 1977).
- 18 On a related note, Joya Chatterji argues that Bengali communal identity was constructed largely by the upper caste Hindu class that came into existence as a landed aristocracy favoured by the

- colonial powers. Further, this identity was predicated on dangerous anti-Muslim sentiment (Chatterji 2002).
- 19 Ashis Nandy writes that Vivekananda associated the west with "power and hegemony, and with a superior civilisation", thus attempting to Christianise Hinduism by turning it "into an organised religion with an organised priesthood, church and missionaries" (Nandy 1988: 24). It is not surprising that the larger part of Vivekananda's active and productive life coincided with his residence in the west (Sen 2006: ix).
- 20 Scholars such as Walter Neevel have pointed out that Ramakrishna was sanitised into a benign, saintly figure to renew and "authenticate" the Hindu religious tradition for a western educated Indian middle class. The saint was also depicted as an *advaitin*, wholly consistent with Vivekananda's Hinduism (1976: 53-97). Partha Chatterjee and Sumit Sarkar argue that the *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* by Ramakrishna devotee Mahendranath Gupta is more revealing of the "fears and anxieties" of the urban middle class who appropriated Ramakrishna than of the man himself (Chatterjee and Pandey 1993; Sarkar 1997: 282-358).
- 21 Bhīma had frequent conflict with the local ruling elite. Around 1862, the Kshatriya ruler of Rairakhol imprisoned him; around 1891, the king of Sonapur, Niladhar Singh Deo, accused him of immoral practices and challenged him to prove his purity through an *agnipariksha* (a trial by fire). The king's death before the event could take place confirmed Bhīma's sainthood for many (Satpathy 2006: 19-20).
- 22 Bhīma's physical blindness can also be read as a metaphor for an enlightened inward gaze (Beltz 2003: 237-38).
- 23 Mahima Dharmi ascetics did not wish to live in total detachment from the material world, wanting to be fed and clothed by local patrons who valued their spiritual message (Guzy 2003).
- 24 Satya Mohanty makes a similar point in his analysis of the Oriya *Lakshmi Purana*. He argues that the goddess Lakshmi has an egalitarian vision in which the worth of an individual is determined by the individual's action, duty and work rather than static caste hierarchies (2008: 5). This idea is also expounded in the *Mahabharata*, translated by Sarala Das into Oriya centuries before Bhīma was writing. The *Mahabharata* revolves around the question of who deserves the throne of Hastinapur, asking whether one earns one's lot based on one's actions or because of their place in the kinship, social or religious hierarchy.
- 25 In making this argument I implicitly rely on the idea that religion, secularism as well as the binary created between them and us are discursive constructs. As King and Asad among others have shown, colonial epistemology categorised religion, deciding what was to fit into it, resulting in a considerably altered "Hinduism" and Buddhism. When I argue that particular forms of religious and secular subjectivity are universals both in the west and the non-west, I am not referring to specific colonial and postcolonial religions, but validating the human characteristics of thinking and living in myth, magic and the sacred, as well as in secular modes.
- 26 Tantra celebrates sexual experience by recognising the deities Shiva and Shakti, or *purusha* and *prakriti*, soul and body, as the *lingam* and *yonis*, the masculine and feminine energies which create the universe in their sexual union, providing a dharmic path to *moksha*.
- 27 Acyutananda Das, one of the *panchaskaha* poets, uses a similar image in his *Brahma-Sankhali*. "Who is an embodied siddha, who has not gone against the current? Moving in the upstream direction the lake of mind is full" (Baumer and Beltz 2010: 303).
- 28 This is also clear, for instance, in Bhīma's worship of Krishna through seeing himself as Radha reborn (Beltz and Mishra 2008). In this bhakti tradition,

romantic love between human beings in the material world is seen as merely a diminished, illusionary reflection of the soul's original, ecstatic spiritual love for Krishna, an incarnation of brahman. Thus the practice of romantic love enacts and therefore produces the spiritual union with brahman that yields *moksha*.

- 29 The unenlightened body is often spoken of in the Sankhya terminology of *sthula* (gross) but Bhīma also refers to the *sukma sharira* (subtle body). Only the gross body "dies"; the subtle body survives as the product of the union of the guru or brahman with the *shisya*, or disciple, in *moksha*. Bhīma writes, "Just as flesh covers bones, so do, Guru and shisya envelope each other in the ocean of wisdom. Just as blood flows through flesh all over the body, so is the relation/between guru and shisya/How can one separate the two?" The subtle body here functions as a tantric vehicle towards *moksha*, becoming the metaphor for the union of the guru and disciple.
- 30 Krishna is supposed to have conducted his "dance" or love play in the Kadamba tree's hospitable shade. The "rasa lila" or "the dance of divine love", is considered one of the highest of Krishna's pastimes because it results in the creation of the universe. Thus while Bhīma's cognitive thought processes reject rituals and idols in favour of finding brahman within oneself, he also acknowledges the existence of deities and idols through his tantric celebration of Krishna as an incarnation of brahman.

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