

Origin and Growth of the Sect of the Hindu Dissenters who profess to be the followers of Alekh

The Commissioner of the Orissa Division writes :

1. The founder of the sect is said to have been one Mukund Das. He lived for a long time in Puri as an Achari Vishnava, and was known as the Dhula Babaji from the fact of his daubing his body with ashes.
2. About thirty years ago he left Puri and came to Dhenkanal, one of the Tributary States of Cuttack, where he selected as his dwelling place the Kapilas hills near a shrine of Mahadev. During the first twelve years of his residence at Kapilas, Mukund Das lived on fruits and accordingly was known as the Phalahari Babaji. The next twelve years were passed on milk and water which secured him the cognomen of Kshira-Nira-Payi.

During his sojourn at Kapilas, he was known to be a devout worshipper of the local idol, and took much pains in improving the place by cutting the jungle, making gardens, looking after the Bhog or sacred food of the idol, and taking care of the pilgrims who visit the hills periodically. This procured him the respect of the mother of the late Maharaja of Dhenkanal, who supplied his food. He gradually succeeded in securing the respect of the people of the surrounding villages and the popular believe was that he was in secret communion with the idol and could successfully intercede with it on behalf of its votaries. The currency of this belief was further facilitated by the fact of his taking special care of the sick people who resorted to Kapilas for the benefit of their health, and very generally succeeded in getting it restored, and his visiting the temple at the dead of night while every one had retired to rest.

3. After thus remaining at Kapilas for several years, and finding that he had sufficiently established his reputation and secured the respect of the people Mukund Das left the place and began to preach that Mahadev and other idols worshipped by the Hindus were nothing else but stone and wood, and that the worship of these destructible articles was useless and of no avail, that the Creator of the Universe was Alekh or Mahima (which literally means 'glorious') a spiritual Being without form, omnipresent and omniscient, and that he alone could hold communion with him and get his prayer granted. He eschewed his Kaupin (waist cloth) and Kanthi (wooden beads worn round the neck), the two distinctive features in the raiment of a Vaishnava, and wore Kumbhipat (the bark of a tree called Kumbhi) to cover his nakedness.
4. From Kapilas, Mukund Das went to Puri, where he remained for some time in a hut on the sands near the temple of Lokanath Mahadev. He next came to Darutheng in the Government state of Khorda in Puri where he built a tungi (a place of worship), and commenced to propagate the new doctrine. It was at this place that Mukund Das was deified and began to be addressed as Mahima Gosain. It appears that one Gobind Das was his first, and Narsing Das his 2nd disciple, others followed their example, and in course of time all these followers dispersed on all sides for propagation of the new doctrine, shortly after a place of worship was established at Malbeharpur in Kallah Banky; other places were opened in some of the remaining Tributary States as well as in Sambalpur, Puri and Cuttack. At some of these places of worship the Mahima Gosain gave large feasts, which were numerously attended. In 1875 in the month of Kartic on the day of full moon, a fair was held at Jacka in Dhenkanal, where a large number of the followers of the Gosain assembled with rich presents including valuable clothes,

silver utensils, and C. It is said that the Babaji, or Swami as he was also addressed, offered these presents to the late Maharaja of Dhenkanal, and on his declining to accept them they were openly burnt in the fire of the sacred Dhuni (fire kept up by religious mendicants). Thus in a few years the Mahima Gosain succeeded in making many disciples and followers, and on the days of the full moon thousands of men and women from distant parts of the country might have been seen wending their way to the tungis, with bany loads of ghee, sugar and other valuable presents. It is said that at present the new faith is more popular in Sambalpur than in any other district. It is confined mostly to the ignorant and illiterate people of the lower classes of the Hindu community, who were it is said, induced to adopt the new religion by hopes of enjoyment if they followed, and threats of perdition if they did not follow, its precepts.

5. The disciples of the Mahima Swami inculcate self-denial and resignation to God as the sources of salvation, they do not aspire after worldly greatness or pleasure, extreme humility is one of their characteristics. They have no prescribed mode of worship except praise of god and prayer for his mercy. They recognize the Bhagavata, one of the religious books of the Hindus, but interpret it in a different way from the Hindus,. They have a Malika, or book of predictions, which treats of the incarnation of Alekh in the shape of Mahima Swami to redeem the world from sin and to indicate the way to salvation. Besides this they have got another book containing songs and dialogues interpreting the truth of Alekh. Most of these songs, & c., are said to have been composed by Bhima Bhoi, a Khond, who is said to have been born blind, and afterwards endowed with sight by the Mahima Swami.

6. The following extract from the reports of the Manager of Dhenkanal throws some light on the real sentiments of the Swami.

“The man who was at first called the Phalahari Gosain was afterwards designated Mahima Gosain, and was believed to be an incarnation of the almighty God. In the year 1874, while I was on tour in the interior of Dhenkanal, the founder of the Mahima or Alekh religion went with me from place to place and was with me about a week, and I also saw him on several other occasions, but I never heard from him that he professed to be the Creator of the world as his disciples and followers believed him to be. From what I heard from him, I concluded that he believed that the Creator of the world was a spiritual Being, omnipresent and omniscient, without any form, whom he called Mahima and also Alekh Prabhu, and that he alone could communicate with the Alekh Prabhu and get down what he wished. He believed in the existence of the Hindu gods and goddesses, but said that they were under his commands, and that they were to obey whatever he wished them to do.

7. The followers of the Alekh Swami are divided into three sects (i) The Kumbhipatias (ii) The Konapatias and (iii) The Asritas. The first two have renounced the world and deem celibacy essential. The males are called ‘Babas’ and the females ‘Matas’. The difference between these two sects is that a Kumbhipatia wears the bark of the Kumbhi tree, and Konpatia pieces of rag. They beg from door to door, have no distinction of caste, and take their food only during the day-time at an open place beside a public road. They eat food cooked by people of any caste except the Raja, a Brahman and a Washerman, whom they consider as sinful beings in this world, the Raja as he is responsible for the sins committed in his state, the Brahman as he accepts all sorts of gifts from sinful

persons, and the washerman as he washes sinful people's dirty clothes. They are not accustomed to live at any one place for more than a day, or to beg twice from the same house. They wear long matted hair, and do not bathe. They turn their head towards the Sun at the time of rising and setting and prostrate themselves several times to beg shelter and mercy of the Alekh Swami. The Asritas do not forsake the world nor do they deem celibacy essential, they bathe generally early in the morning, and clean their teeth with cowdung. They do not wear long hair nor do they use Kumbhipat or Kanapat like their confreres, but use gerua basan or cloth coloured with geru or red earth like Brahmacharis of the Hindus; they do not observe any Hindu ceremony or festival, neither do they respect the gods of the Hindus. They perform their marriage ceremony in a very simple way by the side of a public road or thoroughfare, the bride puts a garland of flowers round the neck of the bridegroom in token of offering herself to him, and the friends and relatives of both loudly call upon their Alekh Swami to protect the new pair in their career through life. Polygamy is prohibited among the Asritas. For any misconduct an offender is made to do penance by drinking a solution of cowdung. The Asritas consider the other two sects as their gurus or spiritual guides. The Tahasildar of Ungul reports the new faith of Mahima has brought a change for the better on the pans of that killah, who are notorious for their thieving proclivities. Those who have accepted the new faith regard theft with abhorrence.

8. In 1875, Mahima Swami, who was believed to be immortal died at Joranda in Dhenkanal, and the tungis, together with the gods and chattels they contained, were sold as intestate property. Most of the followers of the new faith, finding that the Swami was no better an ordinary mortal, disbelieved what he had inculcated and

reverted to Hinduism. Those of his disciples and followers who had left their homes and friends and had been out-casted continued to practise the new faith they had embraced.

9. At present there are only two places of worship in Dhenkanal, one at Joranda where Mahima Swami died and was interred and another at Mahalpara where Narsing Das now lives. The Kumbhipatias resort to the former and the Kanapatias to the latter of these places: they are reported not to be on good terms with each other. During the lifetime of Mahima Swami, the Kumbhipatias and Kanapatias were not regarded as distinct sects. Any person who wished to adopt the new religion first became an asrita, which literally means protected. He was not required to leave his house and friends; afterwards if he wished to forsake the world he was required to eat with every person without distinction of caste and to remain for one or two months at the places of worship called tungis. In this noviciate, he was allowed to wear cloth and was therefore called Kanapatia. If afterwards any of the Kanapatias was considered fit to be a Kumbhipatia, Mahima swami favored him with a Kumbhipat bark of the kumbhi tree, and from that time he was prohibited to wear cloth.
10. The followers of Mahima Swami appear to have had no leader since his death; they are scattered throughout the Gurjars of Orissa, in the Chattisgarh division of the central Provinces, in the regulation districts of Orissa and in Ganjam, the adjoining district of the Madras Presidency. The system has however taken more in Sambalpur than elsewhere. (Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal January 1882)