

Brahman as Śūnya: A Manifestation of the Formless Absolute in the Poetry of Bhima Bhoi

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Abstract: The concept of Brahman holds a central position in Indian philosophical and religious traditions. Whereas, the Vedas and the Upanishads articulate Brahman as the ultimate metaphysical reality, the nineteenth-century Odia saint-poet Bhima Bhoi advocates a unique understanding of Brahman through the concept of śūnya (void). Based on the teachings of Mahima Dharma, Bhima Bhoi's philosophy declares Brahman as Nirākāra (formless), Alekha (the indescribable), Nirguṇa (without attributes), and Śūnya (void). Here the concept of śūnya is not mere emptiness or negation of reality rather it is the infinite and ineffable ground of existence. Through his poems such as Stuti Chintāmaṇi, Brahma Nirūpaṇa Gītā, and Bhajanamālā, Bhima Bhoi presents a philosophy that envisions the formless Absolute through devotional spirituality, and universal compassion. This paper explores how Bhoi represents the idea of śūnya beyond its orthodox connotation of void or emptiness and interprets it as Brahman, the supreme, self-sufficient (pūrṇa), and all-permeating reality. The study also examines the philosophical fundamentals of notion by validating it with the Upanishadic notion of Brahman and the Buddhist concept of Śūnyatā.

Keywords: Śūnya, Brahman, Supreme Being, Ultimate Reality, Mahima Dharma, Bhima Bhoi

INTRODUCTION

From the Vedic age to the present, the search for Supreme Being or the effort to define the concept of Brahman has continuously been the prime subject in Indian Philosophical traditions. The Vedas articulate Brahman as the cause of creation. The Upanishads identify it with the inner self, where as Advaita Vedanta declares it as a non-dual consciousness and several devotional traditions perceive it as the Supreme Lord. Within such broad philosophical legacy, Mahima Dharma, a nineteenth-century reformist religious movement emerged in Odisha came into prominence with the distinctive notion of Brahman as Śūnya or a formless ineffable God. Apart from Mahima Gosain, the founder of the tradition, Bhima Bhoi, the preacher and principal poet of the school has immensely contributed to shaping the philosophy of this tradition. It is his writings that transformed Mahima Dharma from a regional religious movement into a powerful mystical philosophy. Bhoi perceived the Supreme Being as Śūnyabrahma, a formless indescribable reality that stands beyond all sorts of thought and

language. Unlike other religious traditions that promote ritualistic practices, idol worship, his philosophy rejects idol worship and class hierarchy, advocating a firsthand spiritual realization of the transcendent Brahman. This article examines Bhima Bhoi's articulation of Brahman as Śūnya in his works such as *Stuti Chintāmaṇi*, *Brahma Nirūpaṇa Gītā*, *Nirveda Sādhaṇa*, *Shruti Nishadha Gīta* and *Bhajanamālā*. This paper also aims to examine the philosophical foundations of Śūnya-Brahman in Bhima Bhoi's writings and finds its relation to Vedāntic notion of Brahman, Buddhist concept of Śūnyatā, and the idea of the Absolute in Mahima Dharma. This paper, through textual analysis, argues that Bhima Bhoi converts *śūnya* into a positive philosophical notion that suggests the ultimate source, sustainer, and ground of existence. His understanding of the Divine stands beyond form, attributes, and language while being available through devotion and spiritual realization.

The term *śūnya* (void), though did exist in Brahmanical tradition well before the Madyamika School of Mahayana Buddhism, it is Nagarjuna, the founder and the foremost architect of *Sūnyavāda* (doctrine of emptiness) who has developed the concept of *śūnyatā* (emptiness or voidness) into a profound metaphysical principle. Nagarjuna considers the concept of *śūnyatā* as the ultimate reality and a metaphysical ground that stands beyond human perception. He asserts that this ultimate consciousness can be understood as serene, blissful and an ultimate state where all binaries and all multiplicities dissolve and all rational conflicts get resolved. For Nagarjuna, it is a 'non-dual, harmonious whole.' As human perception functions through determination, difference, and assertion and because each predication sustains one quality by indirectly negating its opposite, *śūnyatā* challenges conceptual framework. Any effort to attribute a predicate to such notion takes to a limitation and thus leads to discrimination and duality, while the ultimate reality remains non-dual. Therefore, Nagarjuna claims that the Absolute is '*catuṣkoṭi-vinirmukta*' (free from four alternatives i.e. yes, no, both, or neither). The absolute reality cannot be described as existing, non-existing, both existing and non-existing or neither. It can be described as without essence and free from conceptual framework. This realization of Nagarjuna echoes with the concept of *tathatā* of Ashvaghosa, the founder of Mahayana Buddhism who asserted that the ultimate reality cannot be understood by concepts but can only be immediately realized as 'suchness.' Therefore, *śūnya* is not a negative concept but it lies beyond any conceptual understanding. It is an absence of definite feature not a state of annihilation. As human language is the result of thought and conceptual framework, it becomes helpless while articulating the notion, yet it is the only possible tool available to

human being. Henceforth, Buddhist thought asserts the absolute as *śūnyatā* as temporary linguistic tool to lead towards what lies beyond articulation.

When its etymology is discussed minutely, the meaning of *śūnya* becomes clear. It is derived from Sanskrit root word 'svi' which means 'to swell,' 'to grow,' 'to increase' etc. Ancient Indian mathematicians used the term to express zero, a sign of infinity and the dynamic medium of all numbers. It is the power of *śūnya* that enables all numbers to swell for the infinite remains unchanged no matter how much is add or subtracted. This mathematical vision presents an important similarity to understand the metaphysical characteristic of *śūnya*. Though the notion of *śūnya* was not completely absent in Vedic and Upanishadic literature, it never achieved its metaphysical vision as it did in later schools of thought such as Natha Dharm, Utkaliya Vaishnavism, Buddhism and the last but not the least Mahima Dharma.

Mahima Dharma, with its metaphysical foundation centered on the concept of *śūnyabrahma*, remains a remarkable tradition in India's diverse religious landscape. While there may be debates regarding its historical roots and connection to regional philosophies, it is clear that this tradition embodies a unique synthesis of philosophical ideas from various sources, including the Panchasakhas. Mahima Dharma's emphasis on an ineffable and non-dualistic understanding of the formless Absolute challenges conventional theistic beliefs and invites us to explore spirituality from a different perspective. Regardless of its historical affiliations, Mahima Dharma's enduring legacy lies in its commitment to the pursuit of the divine through the lens of Advaitavada and the profound concept of Brahman as Śūnya.

Bhima Bhoi's philosophical discourse places *śūnya* at the very center of reality. Yet the notion of *śūnya* is not perceived in his philosophy as it is understood by Buddhist *śūnyatā*, nor it is used as a metaphor for negation, but it is understood in Bhoi as well as in Mahima Dharma as the complete, self-subsistent, all-encompassing Absolute. Such metaphysical reality resonates with the Upanishadic notion of Brahman. His philosophical manifestation of *śūnya* presents a fresh and original effort to reconsider ultimate divine discipline in terms that is beyond conventional categories. Śūnya, in Bhoi, becomes a metaphorical term for the ineffable wholeness, purity, and divine existence of Almighty, who is without form and shape, without attributes, and beyond dualistic manifestation.

Bhima Bhoi in his poetry has frequently used the word *śūnya* to denote the Supreme Being. Even, in his foundational texts such as *Stuti Chintamani* and *Brahman Nirupana Gīta*, Bhoi by

employing the word *śūnya*, invokes to the Supreme Being. Similarly, in *Shruti Nishadha Gita*, he praises the Almighty as *Mahāśūnya-Brahman*. As he writes: “*jaya tu mahāśūnya brahman / niṣkāma nirmoha nirguṇa*” (Canto.I). (Hail oh *Mahāśūnya-Brahman*, you are without desire, attachments and attributes), keeping these articulations in view it is evident that Bhoi perceives the Supreme Reality as *śūnya*, but he has taken its meaning far beyond its simple empirical label. To him, the Absolute not only upholds the characteristic of *śūnya*, rather it is presented as *śūnya-dehi* (form of void). Bhoi says that the Absolute roams in *śūnya* (roams in void), dwells in *void (śūnyavāsi)*, and his shrine is called *śūnya mandira* (temple of void). He even goes further to articulate that *śūnya* is that primordial essence from which the whole cosmos has emerged. He abundantly uses the term to imply *śūnya* as Brahman, as he writes in his *Bhajana Mala*:

He roams the Void, his footsteps

you fathom in your heart.

Limitless is the ocean called the profound Mahimā.

The fourfold elements-light and fire, water and earth

have no access to his Foot. (trans. Baumer and Beltz 287)

He roams the temple of the Void,

the One without form or features.

You cannot reach his two feet,

just cling to the one. (295)

From the above references it becomes clear that *śūnya* is not understood as a poetic term, rather it is envisioned as a fundamental, all-encompassing reality. For Bhoi *śūnya* is not an empty, figurative term for the Divine rather, for him it carries profound metaphysical weight, a fundamental essence from which the entire cosmos has emerged. Though etymologically *śūnya* denotes void or emptiness, Bhoi does not use the term to portray the Absolute as absence of things rather he ascribes *śūnya* as Brahman as he says: “*brahmaku mahāśūnya kahi*” (*Nirveda Sadhana, Canto 5*). (*Brahman is nothing other than mahāśūnya*). Such assertion shows that Bhoi very clearly ascribes *śūnya* to Brahman. As discussed earlier it is not new for Bhoi to

articulate such expressions because the Vaishnava traditions of Odisha has frequently depicted Brahman as *śūnya*. Even Bhoi has gone further to describe *śūnya* as *pūrṇa* (self-complete). He writes in his *Brahma Nirupana Gita*:

*akhaṇḍita brahma se je goṭā hoiachhi,
kichhi ūṇā nāhim tāra pūrṇa rahiachhi.
śūnya mahāśūnya boli tāhākuṭi kahi,
tāṅka uparaku āu baḍa nāhim kehi. (Canto, III)*

(The indivisible Brahman is the One and only. He does not lack anything as He is self-complete. People name Him as ‘*Śūnya*’ (void) or ‘*Mahāśūnya*,’ (great void) and there is nothing greater and higher than Him.)

Bhoi equates *śūnya* with *pūrṇa* (absolute completeness). *Śūnya* for Bhoi is not emptiness but a totality. It is not absence but a metaphysical presence beyond form. Such articulation of *śūnya* as *pūrṇa* marks a noteworthy deviation from Buddhist *śūnyatā*. Whereas Nagarjuna advocates for *śūnyatā* to dissolve metaphysical reality, Bhoi speaks of *śūnya* to assert the divine existence that transcends human articulation or conceptualization. In Bhoi’s works, *śūnya* plays a very significant role in expressing the magnitude of Brahman. This concept of *śūnya* is self-complete therefore it does not need any attribute. Therefore, in Bhoi’s poetry three central ideas such as *śūnya*, Brahman, and *pūrṇa* appear to converge on a single manifestation of the Ultimate Reality. As mentioned before *śūnya* here does not stand for emptiness rather it stands for an absolute completeness (*pūrṇa*). It is such a reality that is self-sufficient and it does not require any external attribute. This *śūnya-brahman* is devoid of any form, description, and classification. Bhoi portrays his supreme being as a metaphysical essence characterized by sheer ineffability. He writes:

*How can I know you?
You have no shape or form.
Please show yourself to me, oh All-Knowing Lord,
Embodiment of the Void.*

*Your one foot is beyond words,
unknowable, wrapped within the Void.
Soundless and fathomless is that origin.
How can one learn that secret?
You are the essence of Brahman,
the follower of dharma. Heroic are your deeds.
One single place is your abode,
yet you pervade every body, and all three worlds. (trans. Baumer and Beltz 213)*

Bhoi does not find any contradiction in articulating the words in this unconventional way. To him, the words carry same meanings as it is evident from his vision of Brahman as *mahāśūnya* (great void).

Bhima Bhoi, through his poetry has propagated the concept of *śūnya*: the concept that foregrounds philosophical foundation of Mahima Dharma and presents God as nameless, formless and inconceivable being. Bhoi believes that everything- the past, the future, the visible and the invisible universe that surrounds him is the creation of the *śūnyabrahma* because in his opinion the God is one and He is formless. He exists in the void. Bhoi has presented *Alekha-Brahman* as attributeless and formless and has placed Him in the great void as he is of the view that the glory and existence of *śūnyabrahma* happens to be in the great void in the form of a *jyoti* (light).

*jaya tu mahā śūnya brahman,
niṣkāma nirmoha nirguṇa.
jaya anādi jogeśvara,
anaṅta mahimā sāgara.
alekha nāma abadhuta,
ye chari jugare gupata. (Shruti Nishedha Gita, Ch.1)*

(O' *mahāsūnya* (great void) brahma you are free of desire, *moha* (attachment) and without attributes. You are the god of yogis, whose glory is measureless. *Alekha abadhuta* (ascetic) is your name that is mysterious to the world)

Bhima Bhoi, through his poetry, by reflecting the concept of *sūnya*, has invoked the Brahman consciousness into the mind of his readers. It can be observed that through the concept of *sūnya*, Bhoi has propagated the non-dualism of the Brahman. If a close look is offered to the works of the Panchasakhas it seems that Bhima Bhoi's *Shunyavada* resembles with Panchasakhas *Shunyavada* (the doctrine of voidness). As the Panchasakhas have discussed the *sūnya* as the great void, Bhoi also in his works perceives the *sūnya* as the great void. But sometimes Bhoi has transcended the fundamentality of the doctrine by placing it as the genesis of the whole universe and has considered it as the Supreme Being. As he says in his famous poem *Stuti Chintamani*:

jaya jaya jyoti rupare bikṣāta sūnye jā uḍuchi bānā

krpa katākṣa ta arūpe bidita bhagata dukha khandanā. (Boli.1)

Among his notable works, *Stuti Chintamani* stands out as a jewel of philosophical insight, blending the elements of devotion, mysticism, and social consciousness. *Stuti Chintamani* is one of the finest poems of Bhima Bhoi. Central to Bhima Bhoi's philosophical outlook is the theme of *Bhakti*, the path of devotion. *Stuti Chintamani* is replete with expressions of intense love and devotion to the Divine. The poet employs evocative language and metaphors to convey the deep connection between the devotee and the *sūnyabrahma*. Through his verses, Bhima Bhoi explores the transformative power of *Bhakti* (devotion) in leading the soul towards union with the Divine. In the devotional journey depicted in *Stuti Chintamani*, Bhima Bhoi often transcends conventional barriers of religiosity, advocating for a universal approach to devotion. The poem emphasizes that sincere and selfless devotion is the key to realize the oneness with the divine, breaking free from the shackles of material existence.

In *Stuti Chintamani*, the poet contemplates on the ultimate reality that transcends dualities and distinctions. The oneness of the individual soul (atman) with the universal consciousness (Brahman) is a recurring theme, echoing the profound teachings of Advaita. The verses of *Stuti Chintamani* invite readers to contemplate on the nature of reality beyond the apparent diversity of the world. Bhima Bhoi employs philosophical and colloquial language that challenges

conventional perceptions, urging readers to understand the underlying creative discipline of the universe in the multiplicity of forms.

*ye māti pathara ye jala pabana emāne nathile kehi,
śūnya śūnya mahāsūnya andhakāra thilā niśabada hoi.
candra sūrya kehi ākāśe nathile nabalakṣa tārāgaṇa,
dibasa rajanī eka hoithilā na thilā racanā māna.
svarga martyapura pātāla nathilā brahmān viṣṇu rūpa tini,
tetīśa koti deva tahin nathile na thilā śabada dhvani.
pṛthivī āpa teja vāyaba ākāśa pañcabhūta hin nathile,
mahāsūnya andhakārahin sahite nathile ye tetebele. (Stuti Chintamani,78, 3-6)*

(There was no water, no air and rock in the darkness and silence was pervading everywhere. There was no sun, moon and the stars in the sky. The day and the night were the same and no creations were there. Neither the heaven, the earth, hell nor the Trinity were there. There were no thirty-three koti (types) Gods and sound in the universe. There was no *pancabhūta* (five elements) such as earth, water, heat, air and sky but there was the great void with encircling darkness.)

Bhima Bhoi was not merely a philosopher confined to the metaphysics; his writings extend to social issues and concerns. *Stuti Chintamani* reflects his commitment to social equality and justice. The poet vehemently condemns caste-based discrimination and champions the idea that all individuals are equal in the eyes of the Divine. In the verses of the poem, Bhima Bhoi advocates for a society free from the shackles of prejudice and inequality. His philosophy intertwines the spiritual and the social, emphasizing that true spirituality is reflected in compassionate action and the upliftment of the marginalized. As he says “*Praninka arata dukkha apramita dekhu dekhu jeba sahu, Mo jibana pachhe natke padithau jagata uddhara heu*” (Boli,27-7). (The agonies of the living are endless that no one can bear this so let me be in hell and let the world be uplifted)

The language of *Stuti Chintamani* is rich in mysticism and symbolism. Bhoi employs metaphorical expressions, allegories, and symbolic representations to convey deeper spiritual truths. Each verse becomes a portal into a mystical realm, inviting readers to unravel layers of meaning and engage in contemplation. The poet's use of symbolic language serves not only as a literary device but also as a means to convey the ineffable nature of the divine. Through the carefully chosen symbols and metaphors, Bhima Bhoi invites readers to transcend the limitations of ordinary language and explore the mysteries of existence.

At the heart of Bhima Bhoi's philosophy in *Stuti Chintamani* lies the theme of self-realization and liberation (*moksha*). The poet paints a vivid picture of the soul's journey, its struggles, and the ultimate goal of transcending the cycle of birth and death. The verses guide the seeker through various stages of spiritual evolution, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness and realization of one's true nature. Bhima Bhoi's teachings echo the timeless wisdom found in Eastern philosophies, emphasizing the liberation of the soul from the bondage of ignorance.

From the perspective of spiritualism, Bhoi's *Brahman Nirupana Gita*, among other poems, can be considered one of the most important pieces of works. The concept of *śūnyabrahma* can be abundantly found in the poem. As the title suggests, the poem tells about the formulation of Brahman from the standpoint of *śūnya* or the void. In this poem, Bhoi has tried to simplify one of the most pervasive concepts in the arena of Indian philosophy that is Brahman. The poem is written in a conversational tone in which Bhoi, through the conversation of the Guru- of course, Anadi Brahman and the disciple, has labeled the Almighty to be Anadi (without beginning), Alekha (without describable), Anakara, (the formless), Anama (the nameless) and Adeha (without a body) and has tried to establish its existence in *mahāśūnya* or in the great void in a very lucid manner, an approach which is very comprehensible to a layman in a village as he says, "vandai je anākāra arūpa śarīra, anāma adeha prabhu mahimā sāgara / śūnya śūnya mahāśūnya alekha puruṣa //" (*Bhrahman Nirupana Gita*, Ch.1). (O' shapeless and formless being you are without name, without body but full of glory you are the *mahāśūnya* (great void) that can't be written.)

In the poem Bhoi, very interestingly, has described Brahman as the creator and center of the universe. Nobody has begotten Brahman rather it has created everything including the whole universe. Since everything is created out of the Brahman it exists in everything. Therefore, it is the most pervasive and volatile concept. It can exist in everything and one cannot label its

category as it is beyond any categorization. Bhoi further says that Brahman is inaccessible and difficult to understand unless one concentrates on it. To realize the omnipresence of Brahman one must focus on the *śūnyabrahma*. Brahman is such a concept that it becomes the most difficult task on part of human beings to centralize his concentration on it. It is such a temple where *śūnyabrahma* is worshipped and without self-dedication and true devotion no one can enter it. There is no sun, no moon, neither cold and nor heat. Once, one enters it one cannot have all the worldly experiences such as hunger, thirst, want and desire etc... “*sthiti utpatti pralaya kshudha trushna nahin / kamana kalpana banchha nathai sethai//*” (Chapter 1, line-46). (There is no existence, creation, destruction, hunger and thirst, there is no desire, expectation and want.)

CONCLUSION

Bhima Bhoi’s articulation of Brahman as Śūnya establishes a unique contribution to Indian religious and philosophical discourse. While considering earlier traditions of Vedānta, Buddhism, and the Panchasakha school, he represents Śūnya not as mere emptiness but as the Ultimate, self-sufficient, and formless Absolute. In his poetry, Śūnya and Brahman congregate into a single metaphysical reality that transcends all forms, attributes, and conceptual frameworks. Through his poems such as *Stuti Chintāmaṇi*, *Brahma Nirūpaṇa Gītā*, *Nirveda Sādhanā* and *Bhajana Mala* Bhoi defines *Śūnyabrahma* as the foundation, upholder, and ultimate cause of existence. His philosophy establishes the philosophical foundation of Mahima Dharma. It also encourages a spiritual vision deep-rooted in devotion, and direct realization of the formless Absolute. Thus, Bhima Bhoi’s concept of *Śūnyarahma* stands as a blend of mysticism and metaphysics, presenting a distinct interpretation of the Absolute in the history of Indian thought.

Besides, Bhoi’s idea encompasses beyond abstract theology to embrace social and ethical concerns. His denial of ritual practices and caste hierarchy echoes a universal humanism. Thus, the doctrine of *Śūnyabrahma* stands at the heart of Mahima Dharma, presenting a distinct amalgamation of non-dual idea, mystical experience, and compassionate social consciousness.

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