

Hetukar Jha Memorial Lecture – 1



Tata Institute of Social Sciences
Patna Centre

Migration and Indian Experiences : The Historical Context

RATNESHWAR MISHRA

February, 2019



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Takshila Campus

DPS Senior Wing

Village: Chandmari, Danapur Cantonment

Patna – 801502 (Bihar) INDIA

Phone: +91 7781 950 665

E-mail: patnacentre@tiss.edu

Website: www.tiss.edu

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A Tribute to Hetukar Jha

Hetukar Jha (1944-2017) was an indefatigable academic and educationist. His achievements as a sociologist and his efforts of developing the field of historical sociology is well known in academia and much appreciated. Jha who retired as Professor from Patna University was a prolific writer. Some of his notable works are *Social Structures and Alignments: A Study of Rural Bihar (1985)*, *Social Structures of Indian villages: A Study of Rural Bihar (1991)*, *Historical Sociology in India (2015)*, etc. along with several journal articles. It is as a passionate and rigorous collector of historical documents and a builder of archives that Jha acquires even more significance and his contributions invaluable and unparalleled. His knowledge of documents on Bihar and its villages was surpassed by none. At the time of his demise, he had collected documents, which included village notes relating to 6000 villages in Bihar. He was in the process of writing a social history of villages in colonial Bihar and had collected documents that covered the entire period from 1894-1916. It is a task that needs to be taken up from where he left.

Hetukar Jha's association with Centre for Development Practice and Research, Patna began since its inception in 2016. He was part of the senior group of academics who provided valuable inputs to research scholars at the Centre on their respective research projects. Despite his failing health, Jha agreed to deliver the inaugural lecture at the First Orientation Programme on migration organized by the Centre in 2016-17.

As a mark of respect for Jha, the Centre has instituted a memorial lecture in his name. We are publishing herewith the text of the first memorial lecture delivered by Prof. Ratneshwar Mishra and the last paper Professor Jha wrote, *Thinking on Migration*, which he so generously shared with us before he passed away.



Migration and Indian Experiences : The Historical Context **– Ratneshwar Mishra**

Migration may be defined as geographical mobility involving a change of usual residence from one type of area to another. It implies movement on a somewhat permanent basis and over a significant distance. In other words, migration is a process undertaken to break from a familiar social universe in favour of a new one. In this sense it is a saga of adventure whereby individuals seek a different climate in which to explore the potentialities of their own personalities and capacities. It may be pointed out here that urbanization and industrialization are two processes that lead to large scale movement of people from one area to another, which in turn involves inter alia a great deal of decision-making, adaptation, consequences etc. in case of both the societies of origin as well as of destination.¹

Till 1961, the Indian Census Report considered a person to be a migrant if he or she changed the residence from the district of birth to another district. Since 1961, however, any movement across a revenue village or urban settlement is considered to be migration. The Census accounted for migration even if the place of birth and the place of enumeration differed, or even the last place of residence and the place of enumeration differed. Though tourists and pilgrims were usually not counted as migrants, yet the Census overestimated migration. In spite of this, those interested in migration studies in India have to heavily depend on Census Reports as they remain the largest store-house of demographic data.²

Historically, migration and the movement it necessitates has always been inseparable part of civilization at every stage of its development. During the days of pastoral and hunting economy, people travelled from place to place to find fresh pastures and animal prey. Even when they became rooted to a fixed location they carried trade into far off places and their trading activities led to movement from one place to another. Information on migration in India is very scanty for the pre-census period. Yet, people have moved both internally

Professor and Head (Retired), Department of History, L.N.M.U. Darbhanga.

within India and throughout the globe, usually under force in terms of slavery and readjustment of territories between more than one states or for reasons of colonization. There is an old tradition of migration from India to Ceylon, Java, Cambodia and Thailand but no systematic records were kept of the people who travelled across national boundaries until up to early nineteenth century. The exodus of Tamils from South India to the straits is reported to have started before the beginning of the nineteenth century and Indian labourers were found in all the ports of South-east Asia even by the end of the eighteenth century.³ Migration to Mauritius began as early as 1818.⁴ While the exact number of those who left and those who returned is difficult to determine because of defective records, some estimates of emigration, return migration and net migration can be obtained from the official figures available in the *Statistical Abstract of British India* and the official publications of the areas to which Indians had migrated. During about 30-40 years of organized emigration down to 1870 or so some 8-9 million people left the shores of India, while 7-8 million returned.⁵ During this period Calcutta was the main port of embarkation and migrants were drawn mostly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Migration from Madras increased during 1840s when demand for labour in Mauritius began. South Indian migrants, however, went mostly to Ceylon and Burma. Some 4,20,000 persons migrated to Mauritius, South Africa and West Indies from Madras and French ports in South India. Malaya, Fiji and East Africa, primarily the British colonies, were other destinations of Indian migrants. The Indians and their progeny over the years formed a sizeable group in several of those countries and the returning migrants brought enough money to purchase land and to invest them in improving their overall condition.⁶

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries migration, as already mentioned, was encouraged by the twin processes of industrialization and urbanization. To begin with, direction of migration was towards the north and the west but subsequently such movements took place in all directions. People in the industrialized West preferred to live mostly in cities but they also settled on farms in Kenya and South Africa before those countries

became independent. Internationally, population both from rural and urban areas of India moved in diverse directions to various ports of Southeast Asia such as Hong Kong and South Africa and the Chinese to Hong Kong, Rangoon and Bangkok. A different kind of international migration was sparked by the partition of India and creation of Pakistan. Migrations on an international scale have often involved considerable distances as against the intra-country migrations which appear to be relatively short-distance moves. In any case, migration has slowly acquired enormous proportions in recent times and just as the means of communications are revolutionizing the world into a global village, migration and resultant movement of people is 'villagizing' the globe.⁷

The British demographer E.G. Ravenstein is reported to have written the first known paper on migration that was based on British Census of 1881. According to him, migration sprang overwhelmingly from the desire of people to better their material conditions.⁸ Thereafter, the study of migration picked up and a steady stream of texts, mostly sociological and anthropological, began to inundate the scholarly world. There were several published reports relating usually to colonial indentured emigration, but general historical works began to be published during 1946-51. C. Kondapi, N. Ganguli, Raj Kumar etc. were some of the pioneers.⁹ Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery: The export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920* may be said to be a classic in the field. P. Saha's *Emigration of Indian Labour 1834-1900* was written from the Indian point of view.¹⁰ J.C. Jha of Patna University published two monographs with migration as their themes; one on intra-country migration of Maithila Panditas and the other on colonial indentured Indian Emigration to the British West Indies.¹¹ There are many others but Migration as a historical discipline is yet to acquire autonomy.

The approaches to migration studies may broadly be divided into four. First is the neo-classical approach fashioned after the economic theory of the same appellation which sees migration as an outcome of wage rate differential between regions. This is very much akin to the generally talked

about push and pull factors or the voluntarist perspective of migration whereby an individual makes an independent choice to migrate. J.C. Jha's *Migration and Achievements of Maithila Panditas* is an excellent example of this type of study where migration is seen as emanating from dissatisfaction with one's own condition and a lure for economic well-being and social prestige and consequent expansion of social and cultural values in other areas. M.P. Todaro, a sociologist, attempts to provide a model for such studies through his paper titled "A Model of Labour Migration and Urban unemployment in less developed countries".¹² Second is the structural approach which may also be termed as the Marxist approach, according to which historical idiosyncrasies of a given region lead to migration movements. Reorganization of factors of production in a region may lead to shuffling of some of the population of that region with that of other regions. C. Meillassoux¹³ and L. Potts¹⁴ are leading exponents of this approach. In the structuralist perspective the push and pull factors are not seen as operating to conform to the choice of the individual as in the neo-classical approach. To the contrary, they assume substantial inability of the individual to make any choice because of the pressure of the structural condition on him. J.C. Jha's study on the migration of indentured labour to the West Indies and J. Breman's on the working of the colonial policy on the forced and indentured labour migration to the East coast of Sumatra substantiate this thesis.¹⁵ A third approach that is known as the functional approach which, like the neo-classical one, views migration as a catalyst for economic and social advancement of both the area of origin and that of destination.¹⁶ Finally, there is a cultural approach emphasizes the migrant to be a cultural mediator on the rural-urban continuum as well as of assimilation involving new values and assumptions.¹⁸ The approaches to migration studies in general apply to women too. Women migration has often been treated as associational migration dependent on the situation of the husband or the household. In South Asia, many dub women migration to 'marriage migration'. The female migration in Latin America and Africa, with or without family, is said to be

highly popular but detailed studies on women's experiences in migration there as in South Asia are relatively sparse.¹⁹ Of late, however, independent female migration for employment and education has started receiving attention of gender-sensitive scholars.²⁰ The, hitherto, indifferent attitude to this aspect is regarded to have been caused on account of overwhelming number of male scholars working in the field.²¹ Since J.C. Fawcett and others focused on economic migration of women from rural areas to the cities of Asia some three decades ago, female migration is no longer seen as the mirror image of male migration. What is more, though the women mostly migrate for survival under force and have hardly any choice in the matter, yet there are women who display considerable amount of autonomy in choosing their migration.²²

Be that as it may, it is difficult to discern any set patterns in migration and formulate a law thereof but there is some evidence to suggest that migration occurs first from rural areas to small towns and then to bigger and to still bigger towns and cities. There is, however, considerable evidence to show that migration may not necessarily take place in this step-by-step progression. Migration patterns have indeed varied somewhat from place to place depending upon the circumstances. There is a widespread impression that men are more mobile and that they frequently move alone but as already stated that in Africa and Latin America women slightly predominate in this regard and now it has been shown that between 1961 and 1981 female migration exceeded male migration even in India, albeit women migrated usually within the province of their residence or thereabout. In other words women usually do not migrate to distant places.²³ An interesting trend is that well-to-do agriculturists send their wives and children to cities to avail facilities of educational institutions there and themselves stay back to manage their estates in the village.²⁴ This may be said to be - social, as different from economic, migration but even such migrations have economic content, particularly if the woman after the death of her husband or in case of being divorced takes up a job to augment the income of her household.²⁵ In

this sense migration is also a coping strategy. Many women migrate in search of employment when the income of the family is not enough for survival irrespective of the fact whether she has a husband or not. She, in fact, becomes the prime earner for her household whether her migration is independent or associational.²⁶

In some studies, particularly sociological ones, care has been taken to portray the plight of women left behind by male migrants which, more often than not, is pitiable. In order to compensate the absence of the male members such women had to take up their tasks and physical workload along with resultant emotional strain and financial burden, more so when the male migrant's income did not mitigate the poverty of the household. Such women also lived in fear of desolation or dominance or likely dominance of the second wife taken or likely to be taken by the migrant husband.²⁷ Nevertheless, there are cases of Kerala women who have experienced positive influence over the years as their migrant men sent home large remittances from West Asia.²⁸

There are some significant omissions relating to migration studies. Migration for sex work, refugees fleeing from war zones of which women constitute nearly two-thirds, and the old and widowed women from Bengal and Mithila choosing to spend rest of their lives in Mathura-Vrindavan or Varanasi need to be studied at length. There is the need and scope to understand the phenomenon of migration not only as a socio-economic but also political process involving both, who migrate and those who accept the influx of migration. There are instances of national policy involved in the movement of population from one area to another. The attempt at integration in Nepal of *Terai* area with the rest of the country is a case in hand. The government there pursued the policy since 1860s to lure hill men to settle and develop the *Terai* and offset the numerical dominance of the people there, mostly settlers from India known as Madheshis. However, when the former did not respond favourably in view of the insalubrious and unfamiliar conditions in the region- the government decided to let more migrants from

India to develop the *Terai* economically. These migrants along with original settlers have been victim of a policy which relegated them to second grade or no grade citizenship.²⁹ Likewise, there is mandatory mobility involved when squatter areas are sought to be cleared by administrative action and new living places are found as in the case of scantily populated Burma where after its annexation the British government of India took migrants from densely populated Bihar to settle after clearing the forests there.³⁰

Before closing, mention may be made of some peculiar and explicit kind of migration. One of them is the floating migration. On the basis of a study relating to Delhi it has been suggested that there has always been a sizeable amount of floating population composed of people who wander from one place to another, desperately trying to make a place for themselves.³¹ Considerable importance is attached to seasonal and other types of mobility, such as revenue migration and cyclical trends. Enhancement of rent and saddling of unfortunate tenants with *abwabs* or additional and illegal imposts and miscellaneous charges by the zamindars during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries led to the emergence of a floating population in rural Bihar and Bengal consisting of such poor peasantry who being unable to pay their rents became nomadic and absconded on slightest opportunity and the land suffered.³² In India and in many other parts of the world, a long period between the planting of crops and their harvesting or between the harvesting of one crop and the planting of another provides an interval during which temporary migration is potentially possible. This type of migration caused emotional setbacks to womenfolk left behind and has got represented in numerous folksongs and folktales including the famous *Bidesia* of Bhikhari Thakur.³³ There are other kinds of temporary migration ranging from a few weeks to several months or even some years in case of young men who migrated to make quick bucks through trade and commerce which again is adequately reflected in folk tales relating to medieval times viz. - *Dulra Dayal* and *Naika Banjara* of Mithila.³⁴ The question of reverse or return migration, that is, the back-to-the village migration of former residents, with the exception of those who customarily migrate only for a

short period, is one of great interest as it focuses on ethnic or national identities while the identity of the migrant acquires transnational dimensions. Illustrative of it is the case of Indians in Mauritius seeking to retain their 'Indianness', particularly among their girls so as to facilitate their return to 'homeland' through marriage. A wonderful study of Bhumihaar migrants from Bihar to Mauritius particularly their care for domiciliary visits and cultural ties has been produced by Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff.³⁵

To conclude, it may be said that the foremost question related to enquiry into migration is that of selectivity or of who moves where. If we add another question of why to it, that is, if we try to probingly understand the background and while doing so go deeper into the past we are brought into the realm of history and confronted with evidence to reach at relevant answer. Then not only the official and private records but numerous folk sources may come to our help in constructing the history of migration and help it mature as a separate discipline.

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Thinking on Migration

– Hetukar Jha

Historical perspective has gained popularity over the years. It is used as a dynamic perspective to understand and explain different phenomena. More than half a century ago, in the 1950s, C. Wright Mills pleaded in favour of developing “sociological imagination” by incorporating historical perspective for acquiring a profound understanding of “publicly relevant issues”.¹

In the 1980s, Anthony Giddens² reiterated Mills's view in his work *Sociology*. He argues that learning to think sociologically means cultivating our imagination. Since the early 1990s, Immanuel Wallerstein has been arguing against the continuing specialization in the fields of social sciences and suggests “redoing the work of social sciences of the last 200 years.”³ The conceptual categories need to be built up anew. The methods of our research must be redefined in terms of the new objective (that is): explaining a concrete, large scale system that itself comes into existence, develops over time. One may call this historical sociology or sociological history.

Wallerstein was the Chairperson of Gulbenkian Commission on Restructuring of the Social Sciences which consisted of ten scholars. The commission issued its report, entitled *Open the Social Sciences*⁴, which suggests using historical and philosophical frame of reference to restructure social science. Debate in this context is still not over. However, the value of incorporating historical approach for the study of publicly relevant issues is gradually gaining ground.

An issue like Migration is by all means a publicly relevant issue and therefore, historical approach seems to be rather indispensable to achieve profound understanding of the causes and consequences of migration.

According to *Oxford Dictionary of English*, a migrant is “A person who moves from one place to another.” Though this definition is simple, it is also

Hetukar Jha, delivered this lecture on February 20, 2017 at the inaugural session of the First Orientation Programme on Migration. He was working on this paper before his demise.

limiting. Complexities of the process of migration go beyond just movement. Migration can be understood as (voluntary or coerced) movement of a person or persons from one space to another at a particular point of time for escaping the crisis of social and or physical existence or for getting better opportunities of living and prospering in future. Social, economic and political factors influence the process of migration in various ways.

The case of India is all the more complex because of its diversity. There are altogether 4635 communities in India⁵, of whom according to K.S Singh who as the Director-General of Anthropological Survey of India, directed the *People of India Project*⁶, “There are few communities which do not consider themselves migrants. Every community recalls its migration in its folklore and history. The whole of India is a *kshetra* (field) and an Indian is a migrant par excellence Their (immigrants') role in promoting the development of regional language and literature, in building up the economy is well-known. A remarkable account of how the third and fourth generation of immigrants assimilated local culture and contributed to it is provided by the life of Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwalla (1903-51). ... He gave an identity to Assam as a cultural area. He composed lyrics in Assamese that became the marching song of the freedom fighters. He produced the first Assamese sound film.” This is an account of the consequence of migration for the migrants and also for the region where migrants settled. There are, in fact, so many examples of the kind of migration described by K.S. Singh. Nanya Deva of Karnataka came all the way to Mithila (north-eastern Bihar), established his dynasty towards the close of the 11th century A.D. that contributed quite visibly and substantially to the intellectual and economic conditions of the region.⁷ Following Nanya Deva's venture, more than one hundred Kayasthas migrated to Mithila from Karnataka to assist the former in the administration and management of this region. They and their descendants settled here and integrated themselves with the local culture and tradition so well that they came to be known as Maithil (or Karna) Kayasthas.⁸

The genealogical (*Panji*) records which began to be compiled since the early 14th century contain the data of migration of Brahmans and Kayasthas

for not less than six hundred years. Unfortunately, these records are still sealed to the social scientists. However, *Panji* records have been consulted for bringing to light an account of migration of a few families. For example, Chakwars of the district of Begusarai and adjoining areas who had become politically very powerful in the eighteenth century are the descendants of a Maithil Brahman (according to the *Panji* records) who migrated from the district of Madhubani and settled near The Ganges on its northern side.⁹ There are so many examples in this context and it is not necessary to discuss them here.

Besides, one finds an important document of 1883, *Aina-i-Tirhut* that mentions the names and details of each one of Maithil pundit who migrated to Jammu, Lahore, Banaras, Jaipur, Rinwa, and other places to earn their living.¹⁰ Quite a number of traders and money-lenders (Kothiwalas) came from west in the 17th-18th century who settled at Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Jandaha, etc., and gradually became the richest sector of society.¹¹

So far I have dealt with the cases regarding the consequences of migration for the migrants and also for the society or region to which they migrated. However, it is simply the pull-factor of migration and its consequences. Migration also occurs due to push factor.

People in group or individually leave their region when they confront the crisis of their existence. Here, it is not possible to discuss the role of political or economic interests and forces exercised from above for compelling large groups or masses of people to leave their land. For example, migration in the wake of the partition of India is still in the memory of so many people and has been studied by many scholars. What I consider more pertinent is the question : why people in large numbers voluntarily choose to leave their homeland? What is the cause of the crisis they face that leaves them with no alternative other than migrating at a particular time to some other areas for earning their livelihood?

I think, most of you are aware of the fact that Biharis, particularly of north Bihar, have been migrating to other areas as labourers since the second half of

the 19th century. Earlier they used to go to Kolkata, Assam, and Burma.¹² Morang (in Nepal) was also their destination. Later, they began to move to Punjab, Delhi, Ahmedabad, Mumbai and other places for a few months leaving their families behind. The question that arises here is why such migration is continuing for more than last one hundred years? Why this crisis is persisting for a long time? There must be several factors contributing to this crisis. However, I think, the most important of all such factors is the planned extinction of forest cover since the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Let us examine this issue briefly.

Before British rule, Lord Cornwallis (chief architect of zamindari settlement of 1793), stated in 1789 that *one third* of the territory under the rule of East India Company was full of jungle.¹³ He expressed his notion that jungle should be cleared for increasing the area under cultivation, perhaps, for increasing the land revenue.¹⁴ This policy, it seems, had already been adopted by British authorities. In 1783, the Collector of Tirhut decided a project of “attracting the cultivators from the dominions of the Vizir of Oudh to reclaim the unpeopled wastes of the district.” Thus, migration of peasants from west must have been beneficial for them since new village settlements might have emerged for them to engage in cultivation of the lands following the disappearance of jungle. By the 1840s, three-fourths to four-fifths of Tirhut, according to a report of 1854 by A. Wyatt, were under cultivation, that indicates the pace of deforestation.¹⁶ By the beginning of the 20th century, the dense and large forest tracts had virtually disappeared. I will not go into details in this context here since this issue and its consequences have been analysed by me in a separate paper.¹⁷ I would simply like to point out that J.N.Sarkar in his study of the economic conditions in Bihar since Mughal period observed 300 per cent increase in cultivation due to jungle clearing though average fertility of soil had significantly declined.¹⁸ It becomes more clear by the following account. A. Wyatt had reported that in 1847 the average yield of rice was about 40 to 50 maunds per bigha.¹⁹ But, by the end of the 19th century, J.H.Kerr observed that the rate of production had drastically

declined to about 14 maunds per bigha.²⁰ Village Notes of 1903-1905 also corroborate J.H.Kerr's finding. All this happened due to sweeping deforestation. In 1937 conference on flood, it was asserted that deforestation had accentuated flood conditions of North Bihar.²¹ Rainfall became irregular, variation in temperature began to be quite visible, water level became very low, frequency of famine increased, days became hot, soil became dry and parched. O'Malley bemoaned all this and asserted that “there is ... but little room for further extension of cultivation... it (land) ... will no longer be able to support an increase in population.”²² So, productivity came to be too severely limited to support the increasing population. Under the circumstances, migration of people to other areas for ensuring their physical survival became necessary and, unfortunately this situation is continuing – it has remained ignored so far.

The aforementioned account throws light on how the extinction of an important ecological structure of a region has become the perennial cause of migration of its inhabitants.

However, what I consider very important in the context of studies on migration, in addition to the pull and push factors which have been narrated, of course quite briefly, is that the experience of migrants in the course of their migration should also be explored quite intensively. I am not sure, how much our research scholars have been able to devote their attention to it. But, I am sure, this issue deserves to be a serious area of research on the phenomena of migration.

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