

Hetukar Jha Memorial Lecture – 3



Tata Institute of Social Sciences
Patna Centre

Temporal Rhythms in Village Life: Stories of Abundance and Lack in Purulia, West Bengal

Roma Chatterji

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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 It is as a passionate and rigorous collector of historical documents and a builder of archives that Jha acquires even more significance and his contributions invaluable and unparalleled.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.



Temporal Rhythms in Village Life: Stories of Abundance and Lack in Purulia, West Bengal

– Roma Chatterji

Abstract:

In my essay, based on fieldwork in Chorida village in Purulia, I discuss the ways in which the social calendar is organized in terms of narratives about the seasons, marked as they are by ritual and agricultural activities. As in other parts of Bengal, in Purulia too, it is the journey of paddy (*dhaner jatra*) that provides the meta-narrative through which social time is perceived. But Purulia is also a region that suffers from chronic drought. Narratives of drought have shaped historical memory beginning with the Great Bengal Famine of 1943. Tropes of scarcity and hunger that occur in ritual songs or even in everyday conversations are always measured in terms of the 1943 event.

Affliction as a sign of divine *lila* is a common trope in Bengali folk songs and sacred narratives, a mark of grace signifying the presence of the gods in our everyday lives. Natural calamities such as floods and epidemics are the common sources of ritual and narrative creativity in rural Bengal. The Great Bengal Famine is not narrativized in the same way as are the periodic calamities mentioned above. Instead it is woven into the larger story of paddy and the ways in which paddy becomes a part of social life.¹

Introduction

In his influential critique of history as a ‘statist’ discipline Ranajit Guha (2002) makes a distinction between ‘histriography’ composed through the conjoining of history, writing and the state, and ‘historicality’, that is, everyday life lived in civil society, that cannot be annexed to statist projects of World History. The temporality of the everyday is not organized in terms of calendar time but by the “recurrence of something that has been there in all our yesterdays” (Guha 2002: 92). This is, an everyday informed by a sense of the past, a sense of historicality that in India was best articulated through

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literature rather than in the kind of historiography bestowed on us by our British colonizers.

In this essay I will use Guha's conception of historicity to think about the rhythms of events and everyday temporality through ethnographic vignettes from my fieldwork in the village, Chorida, in Purulia, West Bengal in the early 1980s. I discuss ways in which the consciousness of a collective temporal rhythm is produced through narratives about the changing seasons, marked as they are, by the cycle of rituals and agricultural activity, conceived as alternating phases of abundance and lack. Purulia is a district that suffers from chronic drought and woven into the narratives of everyday temporality are historical memories of successive droughts and famines, not least the Great Bengal Famine of 1943.

Disaster narratives are common in rural Bengal. In Medinipur, for instance, the Chitrakars, a community of peripatetic picture-storytellers, sing songs about the floods that periodically ravage their villages, leaving death and destruction in their wake. These floods, however, for all the destruction that they cause, are thought to be a sign of divine grace – the *lila* of the river goddess, who through affliction, leaves signs of her presence on *mrtya loka*, among her worshippers (Chatterji 2015). Unlike the sacralization of natural disasters such as floods or epidemics famously described by Ralph Nicholas and Aditi Nath Sarkar (2003/1976), famines and droughts in Purulia do not lend themselves to this kind of myth making. Instead they are framed by narratives about the annual rhythms of paddy cultivation – by the journey of the paddy crop (*dhaner jatra*) that emplots the way in which collective time is experienced. At the time that I was in the village for fieldwork winter paddy was the single crop that was cultivated. While some households were able to grow maize and a few vegetables in their kitchen gardens these were largely for domestic consumption and far too meager for purposes of sale.

Before I continue with my story a brief detour to explain my use of the term 'emplotment' is in order. Particular events take on meaning by being configured into narrative wholes or plots. Emplotment involves the creation of narrative configurations out of a series of events, carving out beginnings and endings from the flux of time and experience. Plots in turn are shaped by specific types of narrative genre, genres through which they are given form and through which they find expression and are made intelligible. History, for

instance, could be one such mode of narrative embodiment. It is a narrative form with its own forms of creating intelligibility through rational explanation and description in what Guha might call the ‘statist’ mode. Narrative genres, however, are not just ways of rendering events into language by making them ‘storyable’. They are also ways of listening in the mood of seriousness, playfulness or heart stopping grief. By being emploted in the story of paddy, a story that reflects the waxing and waning of the seasons and also the different intensities of the agricultural cycle, these events may appear to have been ‘normalized’. They may be perceived as part of the monotonous and repetitive routines associated with daily life lived under conditions of precarity. But apart from the register of dailyness there is another register that reflects the inexorable sense of the passage of time that shapes and is shaped by human events and affliction. Both registers of life are expressed in narratives, but couched in different languages – the former in prose so as to reflect the submergence in the humdrum events of the day-to-day, events that flow without beginning or end; the latter in poetry so as to give them shape as discrete events and to separate them from the ebb and flow of everyday temporality.

The Journey of the Paddy Crop

Durkura, Akhaan Buru naati cheene mota shoru

The Durkura and Akhaan do not differentiate between the fat and the lean

Posh paurob paure komor dori hent

After the Posh festival the waist band becomes slack [due to hunger]

Aabaar aishe Boishaggo Jeth

But then again come the months of Baisakh and Jaisht

This ditty sums up the way time was perceived in the village – as oscillating intensities – with periods of frantic activity that held the promise of abundance and periods of slackness that presaged the times of scarcity to come. The festivals of the two adivasi deities Akhaan Buru and Durkura Buru are held in mid January, in the Indian month of Magh when the harvest has been gathered and people experience a period of relative abundance so that the distinction between rich and poor (the fat and the lean) are not so marked. The harvest festival (Posh Paurob) held in the last week of Magh (mid

February) is a time of feasting but after that come the lean months when there are no crops in the fields and people have to rely on the fast depleting stock of grain in their homes for sustenance. But with the advent of the new year in the month of Baisakh, the agricultural cycle begins again and there is always hope that there will be a good paddy crop with an abundant harvest.

Purulia has a relatively dry climate in spite of its forest cover and rainfall is scant. In the 1980s much of the district relied on rain fed cultivation as there was very little canal or tank irrigation. The water from the few tube wells in the village was largely used for domestic consumption. Ritual and other cultural activities such as the Chho dance performances for which Purulia is famous are also in tune with the agricultural cycle.² The dance season begins with a ritual obeisance to Shiva, the lord of dance, at the end of the month of Chaitra (in March) just before the new year begins and continues through the dry season (April to June) when agricultural activity is slack. The first ritual sowing of the paddy seed has already been done on Akshay Tritiya in the month of Baisakh (mid April to mid May) or on Rohin – the thirteenth day of the month of Jaishth (end May). The *dhan jatra* has begun and will culminate with the harvest that will begin in November and continue till February. After a very slow beginning, agricultural activity will speed up only with the rains in August-September (Shravan-Bhadra) when the paddy seedlings have to be transplanted from their nurseries into the ploughed fields and the contrast between the parched and dusty fields in the hot summer months turning to a lush green with the rains is dramatic. On a miniature scale this contrast is also mirrored in separate segments of the crop cycle often in humorous or satirical ways. I was told that farmers are often tardy, beginnings are always difficult, and most people find it difficult to fulfill their commitment to the paddy crop with just two calendrical days devoted to seed sowing. In fact seed sowing developed its own miniature calendar precisely because farmers did not just know how much to sow and when exactly to begin. Farmers point to the story of the first mythical farmers, to Shiva and Bhima, who apart from being one of the Pandava heroes from the Mahabharata is also considered to be an agricultural deity in rural Bengal. Shiva, prodded by his wife the goddess Durga, went to Lord Kubera for the loan of paddy seed to cultivate. Skeptical about the impecunious god's ability to repay the loan Kubera gave him only two and a half fistfuls of paddy to sow. Bhima was entrusted with the task of cultivation

and ploughed the field with a tiger and bull. Disappointed at the meager amount of paddy seeds that Shiva had been able to collect he nevertheless planted the seeds in the field. Shiva too was frustrated and in anger ordered Bhim to set fire to the crop. But the fire burned for thirteen years with no respite and it was then that the two primordial farmers realized the power of Kubera's two and a half fistfuls of paddy seed.

"Paddy and humans are rivals", Anil Shutrathar, a resident of Chorida, told me. "Paddy grains have only two names short of human names and that is why we can dominate them. And these names are nothing to be proud of", he continued, "for they are the names of animal dung and human feces. Guha (a title that many Bengalis bear) comes from *goo* or feces and Gobra, a popular nick name for boys in Purulia means *gobar* or dung. If humans had given paddy the respect that was due to it we would not have to work so hard to cultivate it now. When paddy first came to us it would grow ready cooked in the fields. But then a lazy Brahmin once plucked its grain and put it into his mouth while he was out defecating and ever since then humans have had to work really hard to cultivate it and prepare it for consumption." He went on to describe the seed sowing calendar. "God in his bounty extended the number of days to thirty since farmers were unable to accomplish this task on the days that had initially been prescribed." This calendar reflects the changing seasons and the oscillations between dry and wet days. "In fact God showed us what the weather cycle would be like and what we farmers had in store for us year after year." "After much pleading and prayer God extended the seed sowing days to thirty," Anil said. "It begins with Rohin that lasts for one week. The next week is Daha when no seed are sown because it is so hot." The seed sowing calendar mirrors the changing seasons of the year and the Daha week represents summer. Then comes the week called Ketki which is cool, and brings the presage of rain. But the farmers had still not managed to finish their sowing in these twentyone days so God in his mercy gave them four more – these are Aam Da, Neem Da, Hai Bhaat and Ku Bhaat – the last two days have onomatopoeic names reflecting the lament of the farmers and their curses. But these days were extremely hot and so God relented and gave the farmers another two days of mild rain so that the earth on the fields would be soft for sowing. These were Daant Khicchra, so called because God was laughing,

through clenched teeth, at the farmers scurrying about in their fields and Neer Bichhra, because by then sheets of water covered the fields. But this was still not enough for the tardy farmers and they begged for more time. They were given an additional two days, Maghon, because they had begged God in their desperation and Jachhon which means to gather together. Then they got yet another day and the sowing was finally ended. This day was called Bengor Peeth because farmers had to sow on the backs of frogs that were already splashing around and croaking in the flooded fields. This is how farming began,” Anil concluded his story. “From the time of Shiva and the first sowing of paddy seeds we never know how it will end. Will the harvest be plentiful or meager? When the harvest burned for thirteen years some of the grain on the paddy sheaves remained healthy, but there were also portions that were burned and fell to the ground when the sheaves were plucked. It’s the same now, the traces of that first fire are still with us and some portion of the crop is burned by the sun, or becomes rotten and inedible.”

Interestingly, conversations around paddy often occurred during the harvest months when much of the activity in the households centred on preparing the paddy crop for storage. The monsoon months of Shraavan and Bhadra (mid August to mid September) see a lot of activity (*bhor khor*) houses wear a deserted look as women are busy in the fields transplanting the seedlings from the nurseries to the ploughed fields, the air resonant with their raucous laughter and the lilting strains of Bhaduria Jhumur songs that give the monsoon season its distinctive color. This is also the beginning of the festival season that will end with Kali puja and Kujagori Lakshmi puja in October-November. After a lull Tushu puja and Makar Sankranti, both known as ‘eating festivals’, in January bring the period of abundance to a close. There is a proverb that I heard very often while I was in the village – “There are only twelve months in the year but we have to squeeze in thirteen festivals.” Time is measured by the ritual calendar, by the festivals that recur annually and are part of cosmic time. But there is also a perception of time that is reckoned in terms of human events, and these are the successive events of famines that give us a sense of time as history. Ranajit Guha (2002) speaks of the prose of everyday speech as the mode in which history is remembered. I think that it has something to do with the form that recollection takes – disjunctive fragments that are stitched together like a patchwork quilt. Thus, as I said

earlier, the anecdotes recollecting the darkest periods of village history in the midst of abundance at a time of feasting and joy.

The Famine that led to the Winnowing of the Jungles

‘Akaal’ – a time out of joint – is what famines are called and the Great famine of 1943 is the ‘Bon Jhara Akaal’ – the time when even the ever abundant jungles around the village were winnowed to gather the last edible berry or twig. The villager’s have a special term of this kind of desperate activity – *sewa dukha* – to peel each grain of rice with one’s fingers so that nothing edible is lost – one of the many symbols indicating the precarious nature of everyday life. But the famine of 1943 (1359 BE)⁴ was different. “We starved in the midst of plenty,” I was told repeatedly.

In his authoritative work on the Great Bengal Famine Paul Greenough (1982) discusses the ‘man-made’ character of the event. The collapse of the grain marketing system that supplied not merely urban but also rural Bengal coupled with wartime demand, rise in grain prices, hoarding and influx of refugees from Burma (Myanmar) and East Bengal fleeing from impending attacks by the axis powers all led to severe shortages in the supply of paddy, the staple food of Eastern India. One of my respondents, a man with political affiliations to the Forward Bloc⁵, put a novel spin on the cause of the famine. “Narayan and Lakshmi had fled from our country because the British melted all our metal money to make cannons for the war against Germany. After all the two gods that sustain the earth and are symbols of our prosperity reside in this metal money in these dark times of Kali yuga. After the war was over there was such a shortage of metal, we had no money to buy seeds to sow so we had to sweep the threshing floors of the big rice mills and gather the left over grain mixed with the husk. From this discarded grain we got our next harvest.” His elderly father was listening avidly to our conversation, a loyal supporter of the erstwhile kings of Purulia and a vocal critic of the modern form of government, he added his mite to the famine story that was unfolding. “When the government found that metal had vanished they started to print paper money instead. These bits of paper are where our gods of prosperity reside now. After the war, when the famine was over we managed to get an abundant harvest, the boughs of the *mohua* trees in the village were bent over

with the weight of the lac. All the village wives had gold dangling from their ears and necks. When the government officials saw this they immediately raised the taxes we had to pay and the gold was sold at an exorbitant price.”

The old man’s wife whose brother had actually migrated to Assam during the great famine started talking about the families who had lost members not just to starvation but also to the waves of migrations that took place then. “The adivasi families suffered the most,” she said. “They were simple folk and were taken away by *mahajans* and sold as bonded labor in the tea plantations. Many of them never returned.” Then with a sudden change of mood she broke into a song. From my childhood she said,

Daal, bhaat, roma sija khaae re le mon

Lentils, rice and boiled greens eat well my heart

Aar kulhi cholilo jaunomer moton

And the cooli goes, goes away for life

Rele chaapiye re kulheer aanondito mon

Sitting in the train the cool’s heart rejoices

Aar kulhi cholilo jaunomer moton

And the cooli goes, goes away for life

Then she laughed wiping a tear from her eye, “That was the first time that we heard of the fiery iron chariot – the train.” Her husband picked up from where she had left off, “We have had many famines since then but none like that. Now we moan and groan about Purulia’s drought situation but goats are being slaughtered in the market every day during the festival season and people are buying meat at twenty rupees a *kayjee* (kilogram). In 1350 ([BE] that is 1943) four *poila* (seer) of rice went up to one rupee and people fled to Assam.⁶ But not everything is for the bad. My grandfather did come back and brought tea with him from Assam. That is how we were introduced to tea in the village.” The old lady took up another famine story, “You may have heard of the drought years in the 1960s. There was no rice to be had anywhere. We had an Indian government then and since it was made up of our own people they thought that they should help us. So they asked the Americans who sent us *bajra* and maize flour. Most of us had never seen those kinds of grains before.

We did not know how to cook them. We know only about *chapatis* now since our boys have started visiting the town. We cooked the grains into a kind of porridge and named it *mailo-baaplo* since the government who is our parent had given this to us.”

This conversation took place in the home of Krishno Rai, on the occasion of Makar Sankranti. I had gone to the nearby pond with his daughters to witness the ritual bath (*Makar snaan*) and was invited to taste the rice dumplings (*peethe*) that his wife had prepared especially for the occasion. Was it my presence that led to this particular turn in the conversation? I had already spent a year in the village and most villagers were aware of my interest in local history. But was there something significant in the timing of these stories? I had not remarked upon it at the time but later when I was looking through my field notes I noticed that all the famine stories were narrated at the time of the harvest – as if the presence of paddy in the house also brought back memories of lack - memories of famine and drought that were part of village history. It is not only what is remembered that is important here but also the ways in which it is narrated. As we have seen in the snippets of conversation reproduced above, a gathering, or a sphere of activity, such as eating, can generate a whole repertoire of narrative genres which together make up what Michael Bakhtin (Morris 1994) calls the ‘scenario’ in which the event occurs. It is to the discussion of genre that we now turn.

Speech Genres and Verbal Events

Bakhtin describes speech genres as stable types of utterance that are associated with particular spheres of communicative activity (Morris 1994: 80). Since utterances are always directed towards one or more addressees they are always interactive and evaluative. It is not merely the subject matter or theme of the utterance but also the anticipated response from the addressees that determine the particular intonation in which the utterance is couched. The words and the ways in which they are organized create specific forms of interrelationship between the addressor, theme, and addressee evoking events in lived time.

Krishno Rai’s mother moved between several different types of speech genre during the course of our conversation – reminiscence and ditty. She also sang

two *jhumur* songs that had been composed by her uncle, Jotil Rai, a village school teacher:

Bhadoro Ashino bauroyee taanero deen

Bhadra and Ashwin are times of great scarcity

Khujeele naahi meele reen

Even by effort one cannot get a loan

Keeshe dooti kaatobo deen

How will I pass my days

Aage gelo ghoti thaala

First went the pots and dishes

Taube gelo haather baala

Then went the bangles (from my wife's arms)

Paure dekhaabek beedhobaare cheen

Then she will look like a widow (without the auspicious conch shell bangles of the married woman)

Paamoro Jotilo

Jotil mourns

Jomi baadi shaub khoilo

Land and house all were lost

Jiyonto mauraaro odheen

Life is enslaved by death

Keeshe dooti kaatobo deen

How will I live out my days

Cast in the form of a *viraha jhumur* - the dominant mood of the song is that of lament. Songs composed in this genre generally describe the divine *lila* of Radha and Krishna and express the erotic sentiment leavened with despair – Radha's grief at the separation from her lover. Jotil Rai's choice of musical genre is unusual since the *viraha jhumur* is rarely used for events that take place in historical time. The following *jhumur* is even more interesting as it

includes an element of social critique almost unheard of in the traditional *jhumur* genre.

Shaun tero sho paunchaash shaal Asheene bheeshon aakaal go

In the year 1350 in the month of Ashwin a great famine occurred

Ei aakaal bujhee kaal shaumo holo

With this famine it seemed that time itself had ended

Taube boli bhai shaube bondhu shaube

Thus I say to you brothers and friends all

Deshe kee haube kee holo

What has happened in the country – what will happen

Baudon bhore shaube meele shaube Hori Hori baulo

With full throat let us chant ‘Hari Hari’ together

Taka chaul ek pai tao shomai meela dai

Rice for one pai now is worth one rupee and even then not always available

Kee bhaabe praan baache baulo

Tell me how will we keep alive

Tai boli bondhu shaube Hori Hori baule

Therefore friends chant Hari’s name

Jeenee holer kotadaar mukh chaahaa taar bebohaar

The ration distributor behaves differently with different people

Dhaurma dhormi shaukole tejeelo

All have lost dharma

Tai boli bondhu shaube Hori Hori baulo

Thus I say to you friends, chant Hari’s name

Deshe kee haube kee hoilo

The *jhumur* uses a form of ‘enhanced speech’ distanced from everyday language. It uses words to create the ‘scenario’ for the event. It is envisioned

as a 'spectacle poem' in which the singer stands apart to witness the divine performance described in the lyrics, calling its audience to participate in this act of worshipful viewing as well (Goodwin 1998). For Bakhtin (Morris 1994) all speech genres reflect the intentions of their speakers not only by means of the content of the utterance but also by their particular style and intonation. Thus the genre not only conceptualizes the world in a certain way but also allows for its evaluation by the tone and expression. The *viraha jhumur* expresses devotion to a personal god. It is a form of *bhakti sangeet*, of love in separation or *viraha bhakti* (Hardy 1983). But neither of the two *jhumurs* composed by Jotil Rai express devotion as their thematic. Was his choice of genre a reflection of his educational status as a teacher? This form of *jhumur* is considered to be a high literary form set apart from other genres of folk songs in Purulia and the only one where personal authorship is acknowledged. We might consider the first *jhumur* to be a novel experiment in the use of the emotional tone of *viraha* so that the despair of separation from the divine lord is transformed into a state of desolation caused by the devastation of the famine.

But what about the second *jhumur* - its satirical tone seems far removed from the conventional moods expressed in this genre. It is not as if satire is never thematised in the musical repertoire of the villagers but the genres that do so are typically group songs sung by women on ritual occasions such as the Tushu song given below;

Bagmundi ta bauro aubdhokaar

This Bagmundi is very dark

Taangai deebo go bijleer taar

I will hang up an electricity cable

Bagmundi ta bauro aundhokaar

This Bagmundi is very dark

Aakaal korle kene Bhaugobaan

Why did you make this famine O God

Paaner dokaan choone bhaumokaal

The pan shop walls are dazzling white with lime paste (*choon*)

(The last line of this Tushu song needs explanation. The song was composed in 1983 when Purulia was suffering from severe drought. The song satirizes the state of affairs when people are supposed to be suffering great scarcity but are still able to buy so much *paan* (betel leaves which are a luxury item) that the pan shop's walls are white with lime paste stains. The implied reference is to the Great Famine contrasted with which the contemporary notion of scarcity seems a farce.)

In Jotil Rai's second *jhumur* the form of the spectacle poem is used to create a distance from what he perceives is a 'scene of corruption' where the chant of 'Hari, Hari' is hypocritical – using spiritual devotion as a mask for depravity. Unlike the *jhumurs* discussed above which have a coherent structure oriented to a particular emotional mood and expressive tone, women's songs have a much looser structure. They tend to string together a series of discrete and disparate events in a paratactic chain. Parataxis is a syntactical device that enables contrary events to be included within a composition by linking them up with un-synthesizing additives such as 'but' and 'and' without making connections between them (Sarkar 1999). It is the very looseness of these song compositions that make them the preferred medium for political and social critique as cryptic comments on contemporary events can be juxtaposed with lines of adulation to the gods. The fact that woman's songs are largely anonymous without authorial signature and are meant to be sung collectively reinforces this fact.⁸

As I have already mentioned Purulia is officially recognized as a drought area (see also Mahato 2011). An important thread that connects all the narratives about the village is the perception that everyday temporality is periodically disrupted by events of famine. The sense of 'historicality', to use Guha's phrase, may well be perceived in terms of the alternating periods of abundance and lack, but this periodicity co-exists with another mode of time reckoning – from one period of drought to another. Narratives of drought and famine in everyday conversation are often emplotted to include the meta-themes of abundance and lack. They also emerge in songs and children's rhymes in unexpected ways amidst themes that seem quite unrelated to the subject. One might assume that in societies that live on the margins these are techniques used to normalize precarity. However, there are also genres that reflect a different kind of intensity and which may be used to disrupt this sense of everyday historicality.

Let me loop back to a previous section, to the conversation around drought in Krishno Rai's courtyard and the way in which his mother broke suddenly into song while the conversation was about Assam and the introduction of tea in the village as an unintended consequence of forced migration. Her improvisatory gesture shifted the tone of the conversation from an even tempered exchange to one of emotional intensity. Respectable women in Chorida usually sing only on ritual occasions and even though her age gave her a certain license this could still be judged as unconventional behavior. Her very abandonment – the passionate outpouring of voice raised to a high pitch which is a feature of the *jhumur* seemed to disrupt what was until then a scene of ordinariness. Was it an unconscious protest against this form of normalization? Perhaps the answer to the question that was posed earlier can be found here. Jotil Rai's choice of the *viraha jhumur* as the vocal genre best suited for a subject like the Great Bengal Famine. The vocal range that the *jhumur* requires and the archaic poetic vocabulary of the lyrics provide a kind of spiritual bracketing that help to place the event on a different temporal register – as if to suggest that if with the Great Famine 'time itself comes to an end' it must be expressed as a 'passionate utterance' far removed from the speech genres that are normally used in day-to-day activities.

Due in large part to the efforts of the subaltern historians such as Ranajit Guha oral history is now considered to be a legitimate source of historiography. However sufficient attention also needs to be given to the ways and contexts in which such histories are narrated and for this the work of folklorists and literary critics are crucial.

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Endnotes

1. I thank the Jagjivan Ram Institute of Parliamentary Studies and Political Research, Patna and Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Patna Centre, for giving me the privilege of presenting the 3rd Hetukar Jha memorial lecture. A special thank you to Professor Pushpendra Kumar Singh for his invitation to visit Patna and to Mr. Neeraj Kumar for taking care of all the arrangements.

2. Chorida was home to the famous dancer Gambhir Singh Mura who was awarded the Padma Shri in 1980. It was also the only village in Purulia where the masks for the dance were made. Chorida village was once part of the kingdom of the Bagmundi rajas, famous for their patronage of the arts and especially for their contributions towards Purulia Chho and the musical form called the jhumur. They were Bhumiya adivasis but had acquired the status of kshatriyas (Chatterji 1985).
3. The figure of the lazy Brahmin who brings about a fundamental change in human society is similar to the trickster figure in North American mythology.
4. Bengali Era
5. The founder of the Forward Bloc is Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and the party was part of the Left Front that was in power in West Bengal in the 1980s.
6. Before the Great Famine one maund of rice cost a rupee he said.
7. Bagmundi is the bloc headquarters in which Chorida village is located.
8. I also came across a children's rhyme which includes a line for the famine in the 1960s that was described by Jotil Rai's niece;

Jhoom jhoom jhumailo

Mae, baaper khawailo

My mother and father made me eat (the reference is to the maize porridge called mailo-baaplo)

Gurum paaka paaki ki

Bel paaka paka ki

Is the bel fruit ripe

Gurum gurum

Hetukar Jha Memorial Lectures

- 1. “Migration and Indian Experiences: The Historical Context”** by Ratneshwar Mishra, Professor and Head (Retired), Department of History, L.N.M.U. Darbhanga. (February 17, 2018)
- 2. “The Unwanted Aspect: Normative Fetish and Epistemological Deceit”** by Savyasaachi, Professor at the Department of Sociology, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. (February 17, 2019)
- 3. “Temporal Rhythms in Village Life: Stories of Abundance and Lack in Purulia, West Bengal”** by Roma Chatterji, Professor at the Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, Delhi. (February 15, 2020)



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