

Migration has been Good for Humanity

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? What is 'migration' and who is a 'migrant'?

- Migration is a phenomenon, a process. Migrants are the people who live in a place where they were not born. That is the simplest and the best definition. Another way of defining a migrant is if your current place of residence is different from your last place of residence. Migrants are different from the diaspora. If you are an Indian citizen and you retain your Indian citizenship, then

you are technically an emigrant. On the other hand, if that person renounces his Indian citizenship, he becomes a member of the Indian diaspora. In such instances, we see a movement from 'emigrant' to 'diaspora'. Also, if you move and work or settle within the country, you are called an internal migrant.

Migration is also, in a sense, an awakening. You learn many things when you go out of your village.

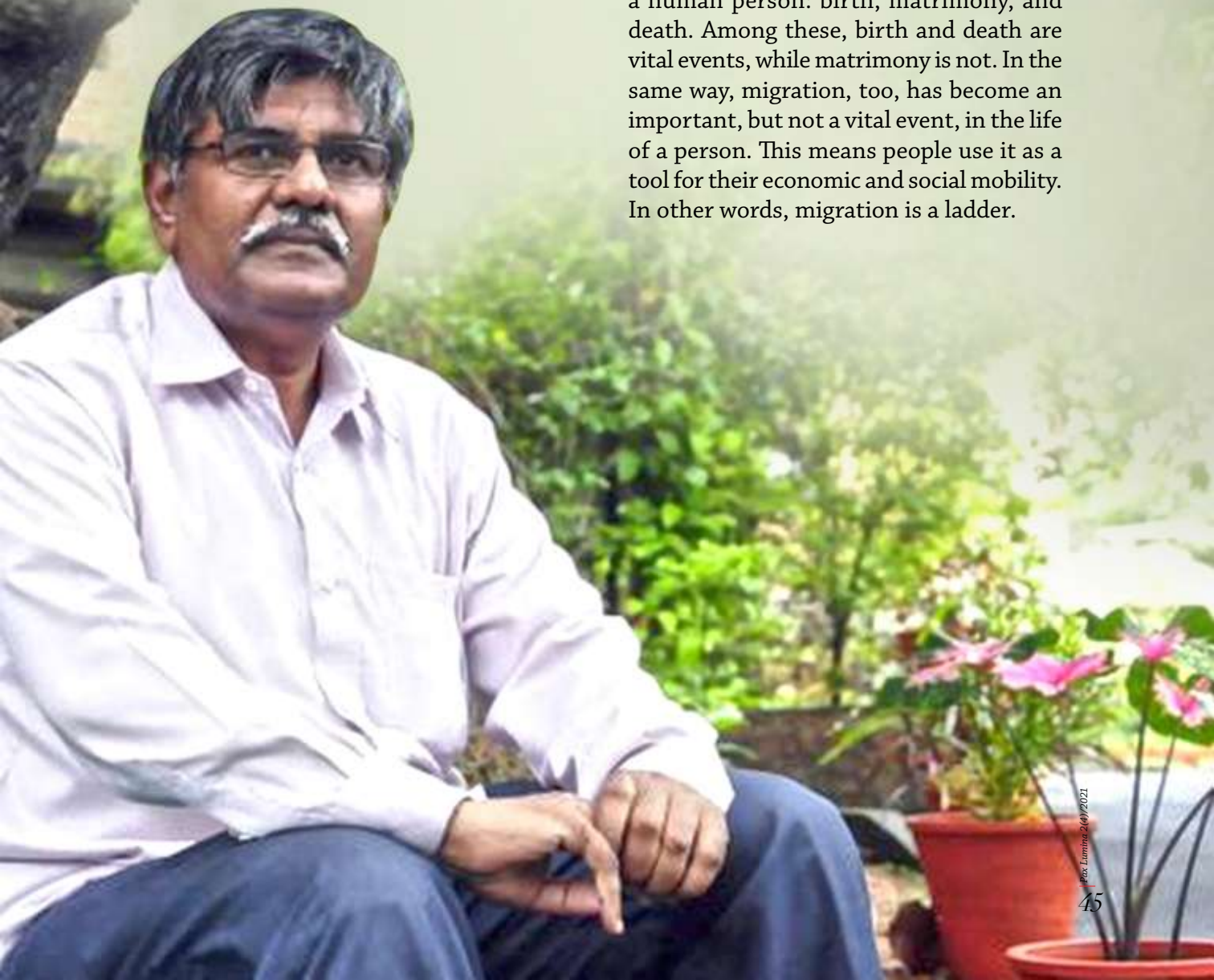
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? We have instances of mass migration in human history. Given the close connection between humanity and migration, is migration inevitable for human survival?

People move in search of a livelihood. It is a quintessentially human trait, because we are not satisfied with what we have. Therefore, for most people, migration is something by which they can attain something in life. It is, for them, a vehicle to prosperity. There are three main events in the life of a human person: birth, matrimony, and death. Among these, birth and death are vital events, while matrimony is not. In the same way, migration, too, has become an important, but not a vital event, in the life of a person. This means people use it as a tool for their economic and social mobility. In other words, migration is a ladder.



? Do you think it took the Covid-19 pandemic for the people to realise the plight of the migrants?

I would like to look at it from a different perspective. If you look at history, from the 1900s till the 1950s, every country in the world wanted to reduce mortality. For instance, the average life expectancy of an Indian in 1850 was 20 years. However, from the 1950s till 2000, they wanted to reduce fertility. China's 'one-child policy' is a fall-out of this effort.

India announced family planning as a policy in the First Five Year Plan of 1951. These attempts have been successful to a large extent. However, policymakers overlooked the movement of people as they were busy with managing mortality and fertility; all the while migration continued unabated. Thus, in the last 20-25 years, migration evolved as a major political issue. Before that, migrants remained hidden from public perception.

So, I would say migration had been there even before Covid, but what Covid triggered was not a migration crisis. Covid created a health crisis. It was we who created the migration crisis. Our flawed policies converted this health crisis into a migration crisis.



Ever since the onset of the pandemic, there has been a tussle between saving 'lives' or 'livelihood'. I have always called for 'unlocking' because my concern has been livelihoods while doctors were concerned about lives.

The underlying logic behind the lockdown was that by controlling the movement of people, we could curb the spread of the virus. The government, apparently, did not know that so many people were on the move. As a result, 200 million people were affected by the poorly-implemented lockdown.

If migration is so vital for earning a livelihood, how and why does it become a highly debated political issue? Are not the opposition to refugees and asylum seekers in different parts of the world and the recently enacted Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) a fallout of migration becoming a political issue?

As I told you earlier, migration became a major issue only in the last 25 years. The concept of a 'border' and controlling migration is comparatively a recent phenomenon. I would say border control measures have fuelled antagonism towards the movement of migrants to a large extent. If you look at history, another major factor that contributed towards 'border consciousness' is documents like the passport and Aadhar. These are the means of identifying the so-called 'authentic citizens'.

The National Register of Citizens and CAA can also be viewed from this perspective. Let us take the case of Sri Lankan refugees. India has a population of 1.3 billion. What difference does it make to the Indian population if some 40,000 Sri Lankan refugees are given asylum? It is not that we do not have enough food and other resources. We do have, but they are not distributed equitably.

The root cause of most of the conflicts in the world say, for example, between Israel and Palestine, Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka is migration. Migration does not cause a problem; it is when the governments



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get embroiled in the movement of people that conflicts arise. This can be called the politics of migration. In other words, to a large extent, politics is shaped by migration.

? You were a member of the Task Force constituted by the Government of Kerala to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. Does the government pay heed to the advice of experts from diverse fields?

Ever since the onset of the pandemic, there has been a tussle between saving 'lives' or 'livelihood'. I have always called for 'unlocking' because my concern has been livelihoods while doctors were concerned about lives. In the first wave, the prime concern was livelihoods. That is why we had the migrant crisis. In the second wave, we were concerned with lives as people died in large numbers. As a result, discussions in the mainstream media centred only around saving lives, while the livelihood issue took a backseat. That is why people like me raise the issue of migration and livelihood continuously, to highlight their ordeals.

? Do you know of any NGOs or persons who went out of their way to help the migrants in distress during the lockdown?

Many persons and NGOs helped the migrants. In fact, Covid has opened up everybody's heart. Everyone was helping one another

in some way or the other. I would say Covid-19 has done two good things. Firstly, it brought out the plight of migrants to the forefront. People recognised the existence of migrants. Also, people, especially in the cities, realised they could not live without them. People felt that migrants do exist. Secondly, it treated everyone equally, regardless of one's power and influence. This points to some 'big power' which is beyond our control. Nations fought a war against an invisible enemy.

? Do you expect any major change in the government policies towards migrants?

To be frank, I do not expect any changes. It is not that we do not have schemes aimed at the welfare of migrants and other less privileged groups. We do have the infrastructure, but what we need is to strengthen the existing infrastructure. For example, one of the reasons for the success of the distribution of free food kits by the Kerala government is the robust public distribution system. In the same way, we must strengthen the existing framework and schemes to help the migrants.

? Do you have any suggestions for the government and for the people to improve the situation of the migrants?

The first step is to recognise their existence. Unless you identify a problem, you cannot solve it. Therefore, firstly, we must recognise them and their plight. The recognition of the problem will bring about constructive policies for the welfare of migrants in the long run.

Interviewer: Ivin Tomy, SJ, Student of Masters in Public Policy, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Mumbai