

My father was an undocumented migrant worker. People like him don't deserve your scorn



OF MAGIC & MADNESS
BADRUZZAMAN BAY

NOT long ago, I was watching a webinar on the plight of returning migrant workers streamed live on Facebook by *The Daily Star*. One of the speakers, a top official at the ministry of expatriates' welfare and overseas employment, after outlining the government's initiatives in this regard in exhaustive detail, asked her audience: "Why are there so many illegal Bangladeshi migrant workers? When workers from other countries have passports and valid papers, why do Bangladeshis have to hear that they are illegal and undocumented?" We should think about it, she said, hinting at the practice of migrants going abroad through irregular channels.

I'm no expert on labour migration but there is usually a classist subtext to such questions, an unspoken rebuke directed at the poor migrants for their own misfortunes. Woven into this train of thought is the idea that their "ways" are essentially flawed and their lack of legal status is as much a problem for them as it is for the image of the country. Of particular note is the use of the word "illegal". Just as in the remarks of the said official, you see this word being carelessly banded about in public discourses and media outlets, even though the world has long decided that illegal migrants do not exist—because no human being is illegal. Our insistence on using this dehumanising term denies their innate dignity and disregards the multiple factors that may be responsible for their condition. It also places them on a pedestal below other migrant workers. So the question that should be really asked is: how much of this is of their own making?

I don't presume to speak for all undocumented workers but I can share what I know from personal experience, with the hope that it will add to the existing discourse on labour migration.

I come from a lower-middle-class family of migrant workers. Until recently, overseas migration was in our DNA. The desire to change their fortune led many male members of our extended family to seek work opportunities abroad. I grew up hearing tales of their career progression: a certain *jupa* was doing well at his maintenance job in a

Kuwaiti airport, a certain *khalu* rose through the ranks at an engineering consulting firm in Abu Dhabi, a certain uncle worked as a supervisor at a construction company in Singapore. There were also the tales of failed bids and ruined careers: a certain cousin was languishing in a Saudi neighbourhood without a job, the husband of another cousin was forced to come back from Kuwait. My own father belonged to the second category, and it was he who gave me the first real insight into the life of an undocumented migrant worker.

It still feels unreal when I think how he lived without us—and we without him—all these years. While he was away, his children, including his then-unborn daughter, grew into adults; his older daughter married and had children of her own; his mother, of whom he was so fond, died, as did many friends and relatives; his wife turned into an old woman; his village home, where he always wanted to go back and settle down, fell into disrepair; and his country changed forever. Trapped in a foreign land, he saw the most defining moments of his life pass him

he quit the job to open a fruits and vegetables shop. Within a month, however, his plan suffered a blow as the government issued a decree banning the fruits and vegetables business for foreigners. So he turned it into a stationery shop. After about a year, the government issued another decree banning foreigners from running shops smaller than 40 square metres. My father's was 36 square metres.

This time he had no choice but to sell the shop along with all the merchandise. He found a prospective buyer and went to his kafeel (sponsor) to get his approval for the transfer of ownership. The latter assured him of cooperation but secretly sold the shop himself (he was its owner on paper), swindling my father out of his money. Meanwhile, he suffered another blow when two visas that he had purchased on behalf of an uncle and a cousin were found to be duplicate. Every decision he made seemed to be coming back to haunt him. Then with the help of a son of the kafeel, after about three years since his flight to Riyadh, he got his passport back and travelled to Mecca with a demand letter acquired from another kafeel, who promised to give him a valid work permit.

In Mecca, there was no change in his luck either, as this second kafeel mispent the fees he paid for his work permit and transfer papers. So he had to pay again for these papers. He was also heavily in debt by then. For the remainder of his time in Mecca, he would have to make do with a supervisor job at a motel for *Hajis*.

About a year later, he found a way to get transferred to Medina under another kafeel and started selling burqas to shops. It was a hassle-free business. For the next four years, he worked with legal permits. In his fifth year in Medina, trouble emerged again after it was discovered that his kafeel had been dodging taxes due for having foreign hires. He surrendered their passports to the government, claiming his recruits had all fled away. As a result, not only did my father and others like him fail to renew their work permits or get transferred under another kafeel, they also became fugitives under the law. For no fault of his own, he became undocumented again, and would have to stay under the radar to avoid detention.

Fast forward to 2013-2014, the Saudi government offered a deal for the undocumented workers to get legal again, provided they paid for work permits for all

the years they had worked illegally. It was a big opportunity for my father even though the cost was high. He found a willing kafeel and paid him SR 20,000 to get the necessary papers and permits. But as luck would have it, he was duped again as the kafeel vanished with the money. There were several others he knew who also got duped. They all filed cases against the kafeel at the labour court, but nothing would come of it, and my father would go on to remain undocumented. Finally, in 2017, the government announced an amnesty for irregular migrants who could go back home without being imprisoned. Sick and decayed with old age, he gratefully accepted the offer.

My father is the longest-suffering migrant worker I know. But the way he suffered and got harassed by local kafeels is well-documented. These stories of hardship and exploitation that we often come across are proof that migrants may become undocumented for no fault of their own. Central to their vulnerability is the exploitative *kafala* or "sponsorship" system in some Gulf countries. It's intrinsically connected with the "free visas" which, as should be clear from the account of my father, are not free in any monetary sense, but free of an employer or job. According to a white paper of the International Labour Organization (ILO) published in 2016, "the sponsor named on the visa does not actually employ the worker. Sometimes, fake companies are registered simply to obtain and sell free visas." Despite their being employers only on paper, these kafeels have a stranglehold on the workers as they hold their passports, putting them in a precarious legal position, and face hardly any consequence for their crimes and transgressions.

In hindsight, my father may have been guilty of not having an actual job when he left for Riyadh, but it's a guilt he shares with most migrants who are equally desperate to provide for their family but are exploited by local agents and recruitment agencies in their country as well as the shady companies and kafeels that control their fate in the destination countries. We need to dismantle this *kafala* system. We need to be more proactive in terms of putting the right policies and practices in place. And we need to stop blaming our irregular migrant workers for their misfortunes. The buck stops with the government—not the other way round.

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The author's father, Md Yasin, in his stationery shop in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

My father left us to work in Riyadh in 1998. Before then, he had a small company that manufactured tin buckets, trunks and so on. It was a time when many traditional jobs and businesses in Dhaka and elsewhere were in the process of being extinct. Unable to evolve in a changing market, he managed a "free visa" and flew to Saudi Arabia, leaving behind three children and his wife who was then pregnant with their fourth child.

None of us knew then that he wouldn't be able to return to his country until after 19 years, in 2017.

by like they were not his own, like he was watching them in some surreal TV show on the meaninglessness of life.

For the most part of his stay in Saudi Arabia, my father had been undocumented and he couldn't come back without risking incarceration or plunging his family into further financial hardship. It wasn't so bad initially, though. In Riyadh, where his odyssey began, he had his *iqama* (residence permit) with him and made a decent start with the assistance of my *mama*, who got him a job in an aluminium workshop. After seven months,

Necessary sacrifices, unnecessary thoughts



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

THE coronavirus crisis posed serious threats to the global stock markets. The much anticipated economic downturn was stopped by "a narrow bull" in the global financial market that was mainly powered

by the big-tech surge of FANG (Facebook, Amazon, Netflix and Google) along with Microsoft and Apple and the Chinese BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent). On May 1, *Financial Times* reported, "the five biggest constituents of the S&P 500—Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Google's parent Alphabet and Facebook—now account for a fifth of the entire index's market capitalisation. That is a modern-day record in terms of concentration".

Experts are divided in their opinion on the shelf life of this tech-reliant market stability and buoyancy. For now at least, it is evident that the overwhelming trends of massive applications of online tools and services for crisis management have earned the trust of investors in the tech stocks. Meanwhile, most of the other financial sectors are deeply affected by the pandemic, and are estimated to require 3-10 years for their recovery to pre-Covid-19 GDP. Many small businesses are not going to recover at all. In a Darwinian "survival of the fittest" model, where mutability decides the natural selection, these firms are likely to be extinct. And the humans involved with those firms are likely to be sacrificed too. Are they the necessary sacrifices required for the creation of Human 2.0?

Even as a student of culture and humanities, who has little or no understanding of finance, this concentration of the capital worries me. I am worried by the dehumanisation of the system in which traditional manufacturers and labour are fast becoming redundant. Jute is out, Zoom is in. The buzzwords of "contactless service" or "contactless currency" symbolise a new form of alienation. They rob us off our essential human identities and responsibilities in social, biological and economic spheres. In the name of health and safety, social distancing has become the new self-regulatory mantra. We don't shake hands, show our faces, or sit together. We stigmatise the sick and the dead. Our human norms are changing; either we are going back to a prehistoric time where animal rules prevailed or we are leaping to a non-human future. The thermal images and readings of machines determine who can access human facilities, and who cannot. Apps are tracing our mobility. The machine is deciding for us. Our union with

the machine is consensual. We have become willing slaves to the machine. Our herd mentality is controlled by some artificial intelligence where we are nothing but dots in a curve. We seem to be characters in a dystopian novel where the microorganisms are acting as hunter-beaters to lead us like elephants into a *khedda* (the stockade trap).

The overt use of animal imagery in the *Financial Times* report (i.e. bull, BAT, FANG) led me to pursue these unnecessary thoughts. It made me think how these constructed animal figures are putting humanity in crisis. They combine pre-human animal instincts and post-human rationality to make sure that many of us become redundant, and a new version of us is made available. The disease is already culling those who are physically weak and binning those who are living on extra-time. Humanity as we know it is being sacrificed.

some big data as our phones spy on us 24/7. They are the *kiraman katibins*, the honourable angels who sit on our shoulders and record all our deeds. Instead of such records being used for the after-life, our scribe in hand targets consumer or products in this world.

In my day job, I teach my students theories and ideas to enable them to sift appearances from reality. Our seamless flight into the literary and cultural world has suddenly hit an air pocket. The pilot in me warns about the bumpy ride as we pass through the clouds of financial bubble, the simulacra of a convenient life and the apparently eco-friendly immobile lifestyle. I reflect on the many tools and ideas that I adopted and adapted in the last few months. Prior to the current crisis, this cyber vocabulary sounded like Greek to me.

Why am I not surprised that the term "crisis" comes from the Greek noun *krisis*

this link between crisis and disease is understandable. A crisis is seen as "a moment of decisive intervention... of thorough-going transformation." In Western popular culture, this is often expressed through the Chinese term for crisis, *Weiji*, that combines both "danger" and "opportunity". In Chinese, however, while the first character *wei* means dangerous, the second character *ji* does not necessarily mean "opportunity"; *ji* rather implies a "change point".

Our present crisis has brought us to a similar changing point. We are facing a threat of an epic proportion: our lives and livelihoods are in danger. We are also being forced to change. Indeed, such a change is inevitable, but calling it an opportunity will be a misnomer. We have reached the crossroads of history, and like Oedipus who had to decide during a plague to inflict punishments on himself, we too will have to decide.

Call me a pessimist. Five months into the pandemic, I see even hope flying away from the Pandora's Box. Guided by the wills of FANG-BAT (oh, I am so tempted to bring in a vampire analogy here), we are making many investments to create a resilient and sustainable online system without considering the sacrifices that these initiatives would entail. Gone will be the life that we once lived. And the new narrative will present it as a necessary sacrifice.

Each epoch changing crisis demanded such necessary sacrifices, collateral damages. This is an archetypal motif that is coded into the blueprints of humanity. Our grand narratives highlight those sacrifices.

In order for man to have his proper glory, Iblis was sacrificed. In order for Achilles to have his promised fame, Patroclus had to be sacrificed. When Achilles decided to withdraw himself from the Trojan War after Agamemnon had claimed his trophy woman, Patroclus stepped in. He got killed in the battle to make Achilles vow for revenge and win the war for the Greek. In *Gilgamesh*, the legendary king of the ancient Sumerian city of Uruk, sacrificed his wild-man friend Enkidu to complete his quest. In *Mahabharata*, Karna had to be sacrificed to protect Arjuna's fame. In different junctures of history, there have been different moments of crisis. And in every such moment of crisis, we had to decide what necessary sacrifices we will have to make to change our lives. Economy over lives, or lives over economy. Lives or livelihoods! Time a' changing! What collateral damage are we going to have? What necessary sacrifices are we going to make?

The answer my friend, is blowing in the wind.

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The illusory bubble of tech-driven comfort during this pandemic is punctured by the emerging monopoly of fin-tech. Cooped at home watching Netflix, maintaining a semblance of social life on Facebook, ordering essentials online, and working from home, I thought I had finally found a red-pill-blue-pill moment to enter *The Matrix* and experience a second life in the virtual world. But unlike Neo, who fought the systemic agents, most of us do not even realise that these gadgets have made us stop being human. We have become a cog in the machine where we are nothing but its content makers; all our activities are feeding the FANG and BAT with data and the little bit of earnings that we have. The machine is creating its own myth of sustainability.

For instance, not too many people talk about the carbon footprints of online cloud storage. We are never told of the grams of carbon we have to burn for a simple Google search or sending of an email. Cloud storage causes massive carbon emissions of which we are both consumers and producers. By the same token, each of us is converted into

(choice, decision, judgment), originating from the Greek verb *krinein* (to decide). In Greek mythology, the King of Mycenaean Greece against Troy (present day Turkey) following the abduction of Helen by the Trojan prince Paris. After an initial success in which Agamemnon's army raided Apollo's temple, he captured the daughter of the priest Chryses as war booty. The father tried to free his daughter Chryseis (Astynome) by paying appropriate ransom, which was denied by Agamemnon. Chryses prayed to Apollo, and the god sent a plague sweeping through the Greek armies to defend the honour of his priest. Agamemnon was thereby forced to give Chryseis back in order to end the epidemic. Agamemnon had a choice to gain financially, but his poor judgement ensued the health crisis. Please note that any resemblance between this Greek myth and today's crisis is purely coincidental.

Historically, the idea of crisis involved a primary medical connotation as it was seen as a possible turning point of diseases in which the infirm would either recover or die. For civilisations that have withstood many pandemics,

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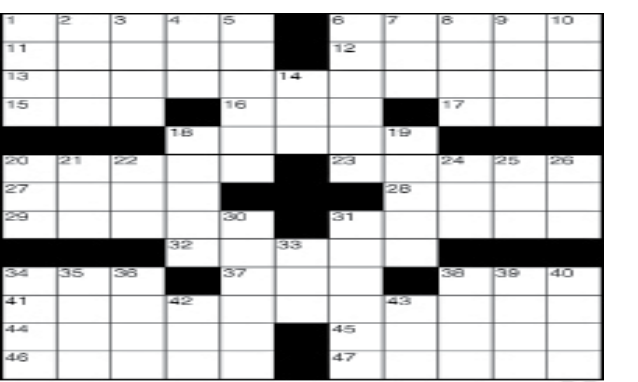


FRIEDRICH SCHILLER
 (1759-1805)
 German dramatist, poet, and literary theorist.
He who has done his best for his own time has lived for all times.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Wastes time
 - 6 Photo session
 - 11 Gave out hands
 - 12 Door part
 - 13 They're up before dawn
 - 15 Noah's boat
 - 16 Tell whoppers
 - 17 Ready to go
 - 18 Answer
 - 20 Stares in shock
 - 23 Student housing
 - 27 Former spouses
 - 28 Casual assent
 - 29 Lukewarm
 - 31 Opium source
 - 32 Draws close to
 - 34 Crunch targets
 - 37 Try out
 - 38 Cool - cucumber
- DOWN**
- 1 Notion
 - 2 Precious
 - 3 Brown songbird
 - 4 Building wing
 - 5 Fashions
 - 6 Gladiator's protection
 - 7 That guy's
 - 8 Wallet bills
 - 9 Storybook monster
 - 10 Final, for one
 - 14 Tear
 - 18 Myrrh, for one
 - 19 Toys with strings attached
 - 20 Obtain
 - 21 Log chopper
 - 22 Energy
 - 24 GOP member
 - 25 Navigating aid
 - 26 Bashful
 - 30 Low cards
 - 31 Speak from the pulpit
 - 33 Fire remnant
 - 34 Swiss peaks
 - 35 Cotton bundle
 - 36 Jazz's Getz
 - 38 Gets older
 - 39 Splitter group
 - 40 Inquires
 - 42 Finale
 - 43 Letter after pi

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