

Migration - A Dirty Word?

by Janet Jagan - April 29, 2007

There is nothing particularly new about migration and the brain drain. Historians tell us that somewhere around AD529 when Arab forces under the new banner of Islam took control of the city of Alexandria (Egypt) there is evidence that the halls (of one of the world's first universities), were taken over and "within a few decades, a brain drain began. Money and power shifted to the east. Welcomed in Damascus and Baghdad by the ruling caliphs, many Alexandrian scholars moved to new cities where new prosperity and a reverence for the classics kept Greek learning alive." (Smithsonian; Wonders of Alexandria, April 2007)

Migration has existed from the earliest of times to the mass migrations beginning after the discovery of the New World, the Americas, in 1492; the two continents of North and South America, inhabited only by the indigenous peoples, were soon over-run by the millions who migrated, voluntarily and involuntarily from Europe, Asia and Africa. Slaves were brought from Africa, indentured workers from India and persons guilty of breaking the law were sent to the Americas, plus the millions of others who migrated for various reasons. These included the hopes of wealth, jobs, new opportunities, land, escape from religious persecution, wars, adventure, curiosity and so on. The reasons are almost as wide as the oceans they crossed.

The millions and millions who live in the area from the southernmost tip of Chile to the most northern part of Canada, with the exception of the indigenous peoples, all came as migrants of one form or another.

I, for example, am an offspring of migrants in the early 19th century from Germany and Poland and in the late 19th century, from Romania and Hungary. The only grandparent who could tell me why he (she) migrated was my grandfather on my mother's side who said that if he did not migrate he would have been forcibly drafted into the Romanian army for a period of 5 or 10 years (I've forgotten which) so another reason to the long list of reasons for migration.

Australia was in historically recent times occupied, like the Americas, only by the indigenous peoples. The British began sending its prisoners to Australia to relieve the pressure at home, so its first migrants were not voluntary migrants. That came later, no doubt from relatives wanting to join those dumped on this then forsaken continent. So, Australia, too, is a continent populated by migrants.

For that matter, the whole world is the subject of one form of migration or another. So it's also possible that the idea or concept of migration is universally within our genes.

Some opinions in Guyana seem to blame the present government for the brain drain and the continuing migration, mostly North. But we must not blame ourselves for this phenomenon. It exists here and everywhere. We need feel no guilt for it. Let me quote from an article in the London "Guardian" (December 2006) "Brain drain is a problem for most developing countries. Lured by better pay and facilities elsewhere, the brightest students take off to seek their fortune, leaving behind only the bill for their education and a higher education system bled dry of young talent."

Even the developed countries feel the brain drain. Britain loses its doctors, nurses, scientists and teachers to Canada and the USA and invites the same from developing countries to fill their places. Canada loses its best brains, doctors, professors, skilled people to the USA and the USA loses its teachers, nurses and others to better paying jobs and invites English-speaking countries like Guyana to fill the gaps. And so, on it goes.

Guyanese left for many reasons in the Burnham years, fear of persecution and discrimination and today, these same migrants bring every member of their families from cousins to uncles to join them; many leave for better paying jobs abroad, for more opportunities, more facilities in their professions, better educational opportunities, especially in universities, fear of rising crime, adventure, and also false fears generated by irresponsible persons and sometimes, the media. I'm sure there are many more reasons for migration, but the fact remains, that this occurrence is not experienced just by Guyanese, but is a universal phenomenon.

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